

NERVE ENDINGS

THE NEW TRANS EROTIC

EDITED BY TOBI HILL-MEYER



instar books • new york

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Dedicated to everyone who's ever fucked me. From my partners in our decade-long triad to partners I hope to still be with in another decade. From intimate friends who are always there for me to long distance sweeties who pick up where we left off even if years pass between visits, to the Craigslist hookup who consoled me when I was traveling alone after Trump's election. From the exes who broke my heart to the exes I got back together with, and even the exes who didn't treat me right and whom I never want to talk to again. Each of you have touched my heart, opened my erotic imagination, and informed the person I am today and the values I live by in this world. You give me courage to face a hostile world and the motivation to want change it. Without you, this book wouldn't have been possible, but that is the least of it. Without you, I wouldn't have been possible.

Thanks.

INTRODUCTION

BY TOBI HILL-MEYER

OUR STORIES MATTER.

Growing up, the only time I ever heard about trans people was in a plot twist at the end of a movie. It seemed about as real as ray guns and supervillains revealing their final form. I never stopped to consider whether I could transition until the first time I heard a trans woman tell her story on a stage.

The first time I picked up a novel that featured a trans character I could identify with, my heart began to race during an action scene, and my nervous system flared into fight or flight. The experience of truly identifying with a character was foreign to me. As I saw myself in her and other characters, I learned the language to talk about my life, and I felt like I had a community even when I didn't know any other trans people. It was a reminder that I was not alone.

I found myself on the other side of things after I released my first film, *Doing it Ourselves: The Trans Women Porn Project*. I got a three-page email from a woman who had believed that transitioning meant never having a healthy sex life again. After decades of struggle, she decided that it was worth it nonetheless. She said that watching my film showed her how it was possible to be trans without having to choose between celibacy and sexual exploitation—something she hadn't thought possible until then.

When I attended an *ertoica* reading in Portland, someone found me afterward to tell me that during the difficult part of their life, when they were dealing with suicidal thoughts, they kept returning

to my writing and my films, and that was what kept them alive.

But more importantly, as I've connected more with other trans writers, it seems like every one of them has a similar story.

Our stories matter. Sometimes, our stories are all we have.

At the same time, our stories can be damn hard to find. Many times I've sought out the hot new trans book, TV show, or movie, only to discover that the story isn't a trans story at all. It's a story about a cis person struggling with the news that a partner or family member is trans. Or it's a story about a cis person who accidentally changes gender with the help of some sci-fi magic. Or maybe there's one line saying that the character is trans, and the subject is never brought up again, even when it would be relevant to what's happening in the story. Or it reads like a trans story, but the character keeps making choices and saying things that I just can't imagine any trans person I've ever met doing or saying.

There's this version of what the media imagines trans people and our experiences look like. That version keeps being fed back to us, to the point that actual trans people we meet become nearly unrecognizable. It's shocking to me how many trans people I know who've auditioned for the trans role in a movie, a play, or even a public service announcement, only to be told that they don't look trans enough. Later, they find out that a cis person got the trans role. When a cis person in makeup "looks trans" more than an actual trans person does, it's clear that what "looks trans" is just another trope, not an accurate reflection of our reality.

This pattern is magnified when it comes to sexuality, and if you've ever tried looking for trans erotica before, you probably know what I'm talking about. There are derogatory slurs, mispronouncing, and misgendering; there are trans people treated as exotic oddities; there are stalkers obsessed with figuring out a trans person's "real" gender; there's flat-out abuse and domestic violence, which are portrayed as the normal ways to interact with trans people. The traditional ways in which trans people have been represented in erotica have rarely been for us.

When you are trans, there is nothing odd, unusual, or fascinating about sex that involves a trans person. It's just what happens every time you have sex. What makes our stories about sexuality significant is not that there's a trans person involved in those stories. Instead, it's the context of the story, the particular dynamic between the characters, the relationship each character has to the others, as well as the relationship the characters have to their own bodies and

senses of self. The same things that are important to any good story.

When I conceived of this anthology, I wanted a forum to explore trans stories beyond all the tropes. When we create our own stories beyond the voyeuristic transition narrative, the confessional memoir, or the “tranny surprise” fantasies of those who would rather see us as plot devices than as people, we can tell some pretty incredible stories. Stories that say something about our lives. Stories that matter.

I wanted to center this anthology around sex because sexuality is such a charged subject for trans people. For one, sexualized transphobia is used to deny our rights, alternately painting us as either threateningly hypersexual or pityingly impotent. But although our experiences around sex are such a critical part of our oppression, they’re also a crucial part of our liberation. The greatest sources of our trauma can also be our greatest sites of healing. Many of these stories explore the influence of traumatic histories on our experiences of sex. Some of them get pretty hot and explicit, like “A Boy in a Bar” showing an ideal encounter with a bartender contrasted with reality. Others may have very little actual sex in them like “Figuring It Out” with a character trying to decide between two potential dates and ultimately choosing neither. It’s important to remember that we have a range of experiences around sexuality, just like everyone else.

For many of us, the relationships in our lives represent huge turning points and major sources of pain and/or strength. Accordingly, several of these stories showcase how powerful our partners can be as sources of support and healing, like D. Scarborough’s “Little,” Isz Janeway’s “please don’t leave,” Ryley Knowles’s “Death You Deserve,” and Cyd Nova’s “How to Fuck.” In contrast, other stories don’t have great experiences with partners, such as Aria Sa’id’s “East Oakland Part II” and Morgan Page’s “Rental,” both of which depict partners who aren’t there for us the way we need them to be. Some stories show the quiet, painful strength of what it’s like to be alone, such as Drew Cordes’s “The Lonely Sissy,” and others deal with partners who are downright transphobic, such as Pretty Eyes Ellis’s “Hookup Culture” and Venyamína macIvèrra’s “feelin myself.”

Especially with what’s going on in our lives these days, we all deserve a bit of escapism. Unlike the escapism that commonly presents a world without problems, however, the escapist stories in this book envision a world where we have the power to overcome our problems. Some of these stories will take you to other worlds. Some will help you see the magic in this one. So be prepared for space orcs

struggling with trauma in Shawna Logue's "Accommodations," for surviving a zombie apocalypse while caring for a child in Rian J. Lloyd's "Grease for a Phantom Noise," and for other stories featuring incubi, nixies, sentient AI, and witches all pushing back against the transphobic constraints around them.

So dive in and get your synapses firing. Wake up all your senses. Because we're tired of the old paradigms. It's time for a new erotic.

NERVE ENDINGS

THE NEW TRANS EROTIC



RENTAL

MORGAN M PAGE

HE'S GOT ONE HAND on the wheel and the other on her thigh, and Mae can't quite remember, but she's pretty sure this is what love feels like. She smiles at him as they both bake in the deep summer heat, skin sticking to the fake leather interior of the rental car, and savors the weight of his hand. She's not sure where they are anymore, maybe Tennessee by now. She's not paying attention, just trying to hold onto this feeling as the highway spreads out before them.

They've been on the road for four days now, picking out a meandering path down from Toronto with some vague intentions of reaching New Orleans by the end of the week. They could drive there in a single day if they didn't stop, but getting there isn't the point. Every night they hole up in some dirty motel—they all look the same—and drink PBR and fuck until their bodies fall back spent on the cheap, scratchy beige bedspreads. Mae wakes up every morning late with sunlight in her eyes and his arm around her waist. For a moment, it all feels so real.

She likes that he's a professional. He works at an ASO in Toronto, running programs for gay men trying to quit tina, even though he's about as straight as trans dudes go and has probably never done drugs outside of weed, coke, and Adderall. But he's the first guy she's ever fallen for with a real job, a job that's cushy enough to let him take two weeks off to go drive across America with her. Sure, he probably had to make up a better excuse, but he still got the time off last minute, no big deal. Mae has never had a job like that, and she can't imagine what it must be like to get time off and benefits.

He'd called her up the night before they left, all excited because

his girlfriend—sorry, fiancée—Nisha had to take an emergency trip home to visit her ailing grandmother in Mumbai. It's perfect, he'd said. We can go wherever we want! They wouldn't have to be looking over their shoulders. They wouldn't have to sneak around in straight bars in Toronto just so that they'd be sure they wouldn't run into anyone they knew. They wouldn't have to do anything but be together, just drive and fuck and be in love. She'd be gone, maybe for weeks. No Facebook, no Instagram, no Twitter—two lovers and a lot of road.

"I love you, _____," Mae says and reaches over to run her fingers over the stubble on the back of his neck. He smiles at her behind his sunglasses and then turns up the radio. Bobbie Gentry fills the thick air in the car, and Mae is sure that this, this right here, summer sun beating down on the two of them as they drive away from everything back in Toronto that clouds up the space between them, this is what love feels like.



Both of his hands are on the wheel today. The music's low, but they're just driving around in silence. They passed into Alabama a few hours ago, going through Athens and following I-65 south. Big sky up above reminds her of driving across the Prairies when she moved from Vancouver to Toronto years ago, but everything's greener here, brighter here.

He's been agitated all day, jumped out of bed not long after the sun came up and got them on the road as quick as he could coax Mae out of the bathroom and into the car, no time for makeup. It set her on edge. She figured she was pretty invisible down here as long as she had makeup on and her hair done and sunglasses and her FTMusclebound escort behind the wheel.

She doesn't want to tell him how uncomfortable she is, she doesn't want to ask him about the phone call he got last night from Nisha while he thought she was asleep, she doesn't want to spoil the moment with reality. If she just acts the same as before, he'll chill out, and everything will go back to how it was for the past few days. Those perfect days that poured out like molasses, slow and sweet, as they zigzagged their way down the map.

"Getting hungry?" he says finally, pointing at the exit sign covered in fast-food logos.

"I could eat a thing," she says, trying to twist it into something

flirty and failing.

He pulls off at the next exit. While he gases up the car, Mae hops out and goes into the split gas station and Dunkin Donuts, pushing through the door with the Free Wi-Fi sticker on it. Her skin goosebumps at the high AC inside the place, and she heads straight for the single-stall ladies'. In the small mirror over the sink, she takes a run at her face with tinted moisturizer, mascara, brow pencil. This was easier a few years ago, when she was younger, but she still looks good—good as in real—and it clears up the vague anxiety that's been tugging at her all day.

When she comes out of the bathroom, Mae finds him in line at the Dunkin Donuts, and she kisses him without thinking about it. That's the best part. They get sandwiches and sit together, enjoying the cool air, talking about what direction to go next, and wouldn't it be nice if they really did make it to New Orleans because you know Mae has never been before, and isn't life just simpler down here?

Before they head back to the car, he excuses himself to the washroom, and Mae drinks the last of the iced coffee he got her. Bored, she pulls her phone out of her purse and connects to the Dunkin Donuts Wi-Fi. Twenty Facebook notifications flood her screen immediately, and when the app opens it loads her newsfeed.

First post: *Alabama Trans Teen Murdered*. Forgetting about all her notifications, she clicks the link to the story. As she reads the few details available about this kid getting killed by some guy who was probably her boyfriend, Mae thinks about every boyfriend she's had who's hit her or yelled at her or just disappeared on her. Because sure, she's a white girl, and most of the trans women who get murdered are right in the crosshairs of anti-sex work and anti-Blackness, but knowing this doesn't take away the fear, didn't stop her last boyfriend screaming until he was red in the face, has never gotten between her and someone else's fist.

When he comes back from the bathroom, Mae pulls him close and kisses him again. He isn't like that. He'd never be like that. She's lucky to have this. So lucky.

*
**

He runs his hands up Mae's thighs as his mouth finds its way to her pussy. Oral has never been her favorite, a source of constant anxiety since she had surgery that her pussy tastes different than it should, that her scars are visible, that she's not real enough. But

somehow being with a trans man bypasses just enough of her shame and fear to let her relax, to let her melt under his tongue.

He pulls long, low moans out of her throat as she lies back on the cheap, white motel sheets. And just as she feels herself getting close, his phone starts to vibrate on the bedside table. It's sitting on top of all the change from his pocket, jingling and buzzing together. He sits up and grabs it, maybe to move it, but Mae doesn't even have to look at it to know whose name he sees on the screen. He answers it, his mouth still wet from Mae's cunt.

He gets out of bed, pulls on his jeans, and heads for the door as he listens to Nisha on the phone.

"What's wrong?" The words come out of her mouth before she can stop herself. Later, she'll tell herself that it's because her defenses were down, right there on the edge of cumming, but secretly she knows she's trying to stir shit.

He shoots her a hard look as he wipes his mouth on the back of his hand and goes outside, leaving Mae in a pool of their sweat. She wants to get up and press her ear to the door, to listen, to find out what's so important it couldn't wait for her to finish. One day, Mae wants to be the kind of girl whose calls matter that much, the kind of girl who isn't the other woman. One day, Mae wants to actually exist.

Under the slow whirl of the dusty ceiling fan, she feels suddenly exposed and covers herself with a sheet.

"We have to go back," he says when he comes through the door, cool night breeze chasing him in.

"It hasn't even been a week." But she knows there's no use. His mind is made up. She pushes the sheet tighter around herself.

"Nisha's grandmother died," he says. "She's coming home. I need to be there for her."

She's staring at him, he's staring at his hands, and the space between them feels so much farther than just a few feet rightly should.

"Sure," Mae says, quieter now. "No problem."

She knew this whole thing was on loan, anyway, that it was just a temporary distraction. That girls like her don't get to play for keeps. And she tells herself that she's lucky she got this much. She's so lucky. So, so lucky.

BRUNCH SERVICE

TOBI HILL-MEYER

I STOOD ON THE doorstep, my finger hovering over the doorbell. It was a gray Seattle day, not yet raining, but it could start at any moment. The air smelled clean and crisp, and all the shades on the house windows were drawn. I rang the bell.

I could hear footsteps. The door swung open. Addyson welcomed me inside. It was bright and much cleaner than her place had been on the handful of previous visits I'd made. Angela was setting down a bowl of fruit on the coffee table to join a spread of cheese and crackers, deviled eggs, and muffins—homemade, by the smell that hung in the air. She was naked. I hadn't seen Angela naked before. I tried not to stare.

When Addyson invited me to a brunch and afternoon sex party, I was incredibly nervous and also intrigued. Even being there, I still had no idea what to expect. When she'd asked me, I'd mumbled something about not being sure, and it took two weeks for her to convince me. Only then did she let slip that she had an agenda. A certain fantasy that she was hoping to make reality. Well, not her fantasy; it was Angela's. I hadn't even realized they were lovers until they invited me to this. At least all the times I'd seen them in public they don't act couple-y, but apparently they've been hooking up for ... well, I'm not sure how long, but a while.

Addyson embraced me in an enthusiastic hug. "I'm so glad you chose to come." She directed me to sit and then disappeared into the kitchen. Angela was kneeling on a pillow by the table. Her eyes were cast to the ground, and without anyone to notice me staring,

I found myself doing so.

I'd always envied Angela's body and her connection to it. Her short stature, her curves, even her fat rolls are placed well and look good on her, unlike mine. Her confidence is always clear, but not absolute. It was hard won. It's different because she's cis, but the way she's dealt with taunts, and fatphobic street harassment, and the whole world telling her that she isn't supposed to be sexy reminds me of the transphobia I have to deal with. I hope to someday feel as at home in my body as she appears to in hers.

I heard Addyson returning from the kitchen and forced myself to look at the deviled eggs instead of Angela's body. "So, am I supposed to be all bossy?" I asked her.

"You're welcome to if you want," Addyson laughed, "but no, you don't have to. We'll just hang out like we always do. I've been cooking all morning, and you can enjoy the food and drinks. Angela will serve us, it'll be sexually charged, and at some point some kind of sex will happen. But if you'd rather simply be catered to and pampered, get a foot massage, and enjoy the company, you're welcome to." She turned to Angela. "Speaking of which, you should probably set the table."

While Angela was bringing out the dishes, the doorbell rang, and Addyson went to answer it. A moment later she came back with Katherine and Rachel. I hadn't seen them in over a year, but they had always been draped over each other at our meetings. Rachel works for one of those large tech companies. She's always bringing snacks raided from their employee pantry. Sure enough, she had a six pack of ginger beer and an assortment of snack bars that Addyson took to the kitchen.

Angela came out with a carafe of orange juice and glasses. "The main dishes are warming in the oven as we await our other guests," she said.

"Did you squeeze this yourself?" Katherine asked teasingly.

"No," Angela bent slightly, playfully presenting her ass. "But there's plenty else available for squeezing if you're so inclined." Katherine took her up on her offer, grasping firmly. "Is it to your liking?"

"Very much so," Katherine smiled up at her, gave one last squeeze and let go.

"Do you have any coffee?" Rachel interjected.

"Certainly."

"Thanks, beautiful."

"You're welcome, ma'am." She turned to me, "Would you like anything else? Coffee? Tea? Hot chocolate?"

"Oh, wow. Hot chocolate sounds really nice right now." She disappears into the kitchen. Addyson strikes up a conversation with Rachel and Katherine about downtown development and rising housing costs, and I tune out. When Angela comes back with our drinks, she notices I'm left out of the conversation, and she sits on the floor by me and asks if there's anything else she can do for me. There's nothing I can think of.

"I just want you to relax and enjoy yourself, and it—" She pauses to find the right words. "It would make me very happy to be a part of that for you and to attend to any desires or whims you have this afternoon. Like Addyson said, I'm pretty good at foot rubs. Would you like one?"

My feet have been pretty tired this week. I tell her that I would and thank her. She pulls off my shoes and slides off my socks. I'm somewhat embarrassed about the lint, but she simply brushes it away. Her touch is soft and heavenly, and I find myself letting go of a breath I didn't realize I was holding. I hear the doorbell, but am not paying attention. She finds some kind of pressure point, and I can't help but let out a moan.

I hear laughter and sit up. Monica, Evelyn, and Lora have arrived. Apparently the sounds I made led them to believe something else was going on in here.

"I'm going to have to get one of those later," Monica says.

Angela runs her hands over my skin a few more times and then kisses one of my feet before putting my socks back on and going to serve the food.

Everything was delicious. Addyson had apparently worked at a brunch place years ago. It was nice getting to see everyone. We'd all been pretty close during the summer when we were organizing all those trans lady picnics, but since then, we hadn't spent much time together. Over food we caught up about new jobs, new relationships, and such.

Monica told us about some fucked up street harassment she had gotten. I mentioned a new co-worker who was incredibly condescending to me and incessantly called me darling and sweetheart. Lora had been struggling to get the bank to deposit a check because

it wasn't made out to her deadname. It was really good to have people to talk with about that kind of stuff, people who don't need explanations and who give instant feedback about how fucked up it all is.

"So Angela," Evelyn said. As soon when Evelyn addressed her, Angela got up on her knees from the sitting position she had been in on the floor. "I want to thank you for being the impetus to getting us all together, but can you explain more about this fantasy of yours? You get to be the one cis woman serving a group of trans women. What's that about?"

"I have great admiration for the trans women in my life. I know so many who are incredible powerhouses doing really amazing things. When transmisogyny effects my friends and lovers, I'm impacted by it too. Especially when it's done in women's spaces, ostensibly for my benefit, it just makes me sick. I wanted to flip the script and create a women's space that centers trans women, where I can be the cis woman who is at your service, and in doing so, show you all my appreciation."

"That explanation makes a bunch of sense," Monica chimed in. "At first I thought the whole scenario felt a bit exoticizing. But I'm not getting that feeling now that I'm here."

"But it's more than just flipping the script," added Rachel. "There's the sexual aspect, of course. And it has an odd feeling of cis guilt, or something."

Angela grinned and looked away for a moment.

"I'm never going to claim to be perfect," she said. "Maybe cis guilt is part of it. But being a service submissive is my fetish. So more directly, this is my fantasy, and I'm grateful to you all for allowing me to indulge. But that's the basic logic of why this particular service dynamic is something I specifically wanted."

Breaking the tension, Katherine crassly interrupted: "In that case, I'm up for being serviced."

She lifted the edge of her long skirt and beckoned. Angela went to her and placed her lips on Katherine's calf. She slowly worked her way up until her head disappeared under Katherine's skirt.

I was surprised how the casual conversation returned, despite Katherine's occasional sighs. After a while, though, Monica summoned Angela back to the table. Grabbing a cookie from the tray, she wagged it in the air.

"You've been such a good ally," she said. "I've got something for you."

Angela's embarrassment took her over and her cheeks flushed red, but dutifully she crawled over to Monica and received a bite of the cookie from her hands.

"I know you've got a thing for feet," Monica said. "How would you like to suck on mine?"

The view I had was quite a thing to behold: Angela on her knees, head bent to the floor, her pussy peeking out just underneath her ass. Apparently I wasn't the only one enticed. Rachel was the first to move over and began feeling up the inside of her leg. Katherine joined in, positioning herself behind Angela, gently pressing her hips into Angela's.

"Ma'am, I don't want to presume your preferences for kinds of sex," Angela said. "But if you so desired, I'd be honored for you to fuck me however you like. There's condoms and lube tucked under the table next to you."

Rachel and Katherine had their arms around each other and were kissing. Monica moaned loudly from the attention she was getting. Evelyn leaned back and was enjoying the show. Addyson was caressing Angela's back and quietly speaking. "That's right, that's a good girl. I'm so happy with you. You're doing so well right now."

When I see Katherine fucking Angela that way—I mean using her, uh, junk to penetrate her—I'm struck with amazement, and perhaps a bit of confusion. All these messages are running through my head. *She's fucking like a man, taking the male role; she looks like some kind of a chick with a dick, a shemale. Aaarrgh.* I close my eyes and try to shut them out.

Then I look again. She doesn't actually look like anything but herself. Despite the internalized messaging still playing on a loop in my head, I can't actually imagine her as a guy even when I try. Sure I've seen that motion in movies and in porn, but come to think of it I've seen images of women thrusting their hips in the same way just as much—sometimes with strap-ons, sometimes just dry humping.

I wonder: how does that work for her? Does she feel dysphoria about it? I mean, how could she not? Does she just do it anyway? Does she hide from it or dissociate from that part? It kinda makes me wonder if I could ever—

No. No, I don't think I could. When I think of what she's doing,

I alternate between a half dozen feelings. There's disgust at the thought of it. There's admiration: I'm impressed that she's capable of it; it makes me see her as strong in a way I hadn't considered. There's a sense of amazement at how much pleasure they both seem to be having. There's a feeling of shame at the thought of enjoying something like that. There's shame at the idea that I've been caught in the same room as it. And maybe, just maybe, there might be a bit of jealousy.

There was a hand on my shoulder. It was Lora. "So, um, I wasn't sure if I was going to come to this or not, but then I heard you would be here." She smiled and cast her eyes down, stealing glances up at me. Is that ... flirting? "But I was wondering if you might be up for—" Lora was blushing now. "Can I give you a kiss?"

She was so cute—how embarrassed she was getting. Suddenly all the times she hung out after meetings were done or the note of excitement in her voice when she said hi to me made a lot more sense. How could I not have noticed? I leaned in and gave her a kiss, and then I pulled away to look at her face. A wide grin was plastered over it. She laughed slightly, and then she leaned over and kissed me again, more deeply, and then she pushed me back onto the arm of the couch.

Coming to this party was definitely a good idea.

HOW TO F**K: A CASE STUDY FOR THE BODILY EXHAUSTED

CYD NOVA

THE ROUTINE GETS TO you. Scanning through your ads, updating them: *I'm available now!* New pictures, new ad copy. Suggestive but not explicit. Tag fisting, but don't say you fuck for money. Reading other hooker profiles, wondering if their persona is selling better than your own.

Then there are the calls, texts, and emails:

"Send me nude pics"

"Are u horny?"

"Do you like dirty ass?"

"Are you tight or is ur hole sloppy?"

Then finally: "Would like to meet up."

If you have the pleasure of meeting, there is the labor of creating movie star intimacy within minutes mixed in with the mundanity of someone's spit collecting in your mouth, tongues often wooden pressing against your own. The feel of genitals being up next to your face, soft and slippery or inviolably hard, and everyone wants you to deep throat. You want to deep throat, because it's important that they know that you are good, that you are special, a boy with a vagina—what a delight! It is my goal in life to make you fully aware what a blessing it is to fuck me.

It's not that you don't enjoy some of these encounters; many of them, you do. Money is a great lubricator, and you love having sex

with some of your clients, look forward to it even. Great guys—some with bodies you love, like the dad you never had, and the pleasure of doing a good job is really the best satisfaction you can ever truly receive. But does someone who works at an ice cream shop go out for ice cream? The routine. The smells. The feeling of a stranger's sweat drying on your body. Being on, regardless of what's going on in your life, who recently was found murdered or dead after a suicide or overdose; the sadness of the walk to the hotel: walking through streets full of shopping carts, people with nowhere to go but the sidewalk, cops circling them like vultures. Taking that step across the perfect perforation from their block to his block: sidewalks tidy, bistros and fusion restaurants a perfect border around his hotel with a bar, a gym, and a convenience store inside.

Sex work is work but also sometimes it is labor, like digging a ditch. A thirty-minute blow job and ass fingering combo, allowing your holes to be stretched to a new capacity because a client wants to fist you—it's stress on your muscles, you know?

This is why you don't seek out unpaid sex. You look at Scruff but mostly to see if there are any potential johns to be cultivated from the pool. At dance parties you flirt but mostly just with such generality no one could expect it to be personal. At friends' house parties, sometimes you share the perfect kiss. Often you are high, and there is that molly glaze that makes everything shiny, fascinating while also not absorbing. But if you have sex, it is usually with your friends, people with whom a gift economy is already established. With some friends you can even relax: be a starfish, experience pain, tell them no hickies, have blunt conversations about STIs. Everyone else feels like too much of the pattern. The sex might be amazing, but somewhere in your body you are on the clock, waiting for them to cum and tell you how amazing that was, and that part is waiting with anticipation for your job to be done.

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That is why you are looking for a reason to leave this conversation with someone you are getting along with fantastically. She sat down next to you at the bonfire, which now simmers as glowing coals.

There are ten people scattered around awake at this party. Three of them are in the shack in the backyard next to you in a k hole—you

can hear them, one orating a story of being on a big ship driving through Milky Way waters. Besides you and her, there is one other person around the fire: they're asleep in a moldy armchair, an altar of beer cans at their feet. This moment feels private, intimate: the sky has streaks of gray coming up in the west, and she is talking with her eyes connecting directly to yours in the pause between sentences.

“Shit, is my flirting that terrible?” she says.

“What?”

“Your face just changed from green to red in traffic signals when I asked what you wanted to do with the rest of your evening.”

“Oh, no, I think I just realized how tired I am. I see the sun coming up. I’m really enjoying your company.”

“Yeah, I should have gone home long ago. But you made me want to stay up,” she says.

“Me too.” And you mean it, but you are tired and the drugs and alcohol buzzing through your body have quieted down, and you don’t know if you have the energy for a performance.

She says: “Can I be direct with you?”

“Yes, I like directness. For sure.” An anxiety surges in your stomach.

“And I want you to be direct back.”

“Yes, yeah I can do that.”

“I like talking to you, I like being around you. But you’re giving me mixed signals, and that’s okay, but as a trans girl it can feel like a gross brush off to me—”

“No, that’s not it at all!”

“Don’t interrupt me, please. I kind of assumed so, otherwise I wouldn’t be having this conversation with you. But what’s up? We’ve been flirting for hours, and as soon as I got direct, you started to get evasive. If you don’t want to do anything, that’s obviously totally fine. But I want to part ways without having to wonder if it was because I’m trans, so that we can be friends or hook up another time when you’re less tired, or when you’ve resolved your current bout of gonorrhea or whatever.”

You like the way she talks to you. As much as it’s a challenge, it’s a relief for someone to be completely direct about their feelings. You don’t have to build cushions of validation around the places where any sensitivities might lie; she is giving you permission just to say how you feel.

"I am attracted to you," you say. "Recently I haven't been that into having sex."

"That's fine. Do you mind if I ask why? You can say no. I can tell you want to provide what people request, and I don't want you to go into something you're not comfortable sharing."

You hesitate. It isn't that you mind coming out as a sex worker; you've already kind of alluded to that. But it's hard to know how to talk about it without risking becoming unattractive, unappealing.

"I'm a hooker," you finally say. "I've been working a lot lately, and while I don't dislike my job, it makes it harder to have other kinds of sex."

She looks at you, her face open, listening quietly.

"It's just that sometimes when I have not-work sex, my mind suddenly goes into work mode. And that can make getting to know people, I don't know ... different than I want it to be. It's hard to not perform. And then I feel like I have to keep performing, and it makes things confusing for both myself and everyone else."

You try to read her face. Right now you are very awake. It's the first time you've said this to another person. It may be the first time you've been transparent about it to yourself.

"I know a thing or two about feeling like you have to perform all the time," she says, smiling. "Thank you for being honest with me." She looks more closely at you. "Now I might be a fool to ask, but does telling me that take any of the pressure off?"

Right now, the sweet feeling of an unexpected vulnerability is settling around you.

"Yeah, now that you say it, it does. I don't mean to flip flop, but um ... would now be a bad time to ask if I could kiss you?"

"No," she says. "I'm still down for that. And if either of us decides it's time to be over, that's cool."

You get out of your chair and bend over her, tilting her face up with a finger, and you kiss softly, your tongues greeting each other gently. She brushes her hands on your thighs, pulling you in, and you straddle her lap, pressing your toes against the ground to lean into her mouth: wet, tasting of cigarettes and whiskey. She takes your lower lip in her mouth and rubs her teeth against your open pout, sucking you in, and then you open to each other, her tongue electric in your mouth. You both are zoomed into the world of physical collision, rolling around in each other's mouths, hands gripping

tight, pelvises starting to push toward connection.

She grips you by the shoulders: "So, what do you want? Should I ball and gag you so that you don't feel the need to put on a show?"

It doesn't feel like a jibe. You smile: "Fuck you. Just try." You push her teasingly. She pushes you back. And then you are fighting like kids, laughing, hands slapping against each other. With a crack, the rickety chair bearing your considerable combined weight breaks, and you are both cast into the dirt. For a couple seconds of shock, you lay still. And then she rolls on top of your chest, pinning you down. "Ha!"

Your pelvis rises and you twist, but she just sits on your back instead. You grab a handful of loose dirt and throw it behind you. Flecks of it hit her arm.

"Oh-kay. You wanna be a pig pen?" She releases you, and when you turn over, you get a handful of dirt to the face. Your own clenched paw throws one up at her at almost the same time.

"You are going to get fucked up now," she says.

She grabs your face and lets one long line of spit dangle from her mouth over your face while you struggle, gripping your legs in between her own.

"Ah, no! Fuck you!" It drops splat on your cheek. You try to spit up at her, but it misses completely. You raise your head and your lips touch again, her body stretched out over yours, tongues flecked with dirt. Her face is illuminated now, not by the fire, but the sun rising. Her long black hair, pulled back in a clip, is now hanging in front of her face in thick tendrils. Her strong nose goes up to perfectly smooth thick eyebrows, her eyes underneath dark pools. Red lipstick still hangs to the edges of her plump lips. You are both studying each other in the gray morning light. "Wanna go fuck or something?" you say.

"I'd be into that," she says. "This is my friend's house. Wanna use the basement?"

"Sounds about right." Together you pull each other out off the ground and you start to dust the dirt out of your leg hair. "Come on, let's go wash off."

The two of you climb the stairs up to the kitchen, leaving the person still sleeping, now curled up in the chair with both of your jackets over them. In the kitchen you wash your faces off, filling up jars of water and sharing them back and forth.

"I'm hungry," she says, and she opens the fridge. She pulls out yogurt, some jam, and eggs, and then she cracks a tray of ice cubes and slides them into a bowl.

"What are you planning to do with all that?" you say.

"To be real? I think the best sex for the two of us to have is weird, messy, and funny, and if you don't mind, I'm bringing these downstairs with us."

"Okay, sure," you say. "Whatever it is, I'm into it. Um, you know I'm trans too, right?"

"I wasn't sure, but I kind of guessed," she says. "You've got a lot of a lisp for a cis guy who wants to get down with the likes of me."

"So rude!" But you're smiling.

"Anything you want to bring down?" she asks

"Um, I mean if it's not too weird, can we bring down a knife? I'm kind of in the mood to get cut, and I like being a bit scared sometimes."

She picks a steak knife out of the drawer, and she pokes it against her finger. "This is the sharpest there is, but it's still gonna be brutal," she says. "Bring the rest of that stuff down."

The basement room is just a plastic sheeted mattress on a cement floor with a box of gloves and condoms next to it. One window provides a triangle of light, in which you can see flecks of dust slowly move through the air. You stand face to face.

"Are you okay with slapping?" she asks, holding your face in her palm.

"Yeah, are you?" And before you finish, a hand cuts against your jaw sharply. You breathe in in a fast hiccup. "Okay, wow."

"Yes, I am," she grins. You line up her face and your palm hits her cheek, glancing off her eye. "Watch, it fucker," she says, and then she hits you again, and as your neck recalibrates, her hand is on your throat and she's guiding you onto the mattress, bringing you to your knees and then back, her sitting on your chest. One hand goes into the yogurt container and scoops out three fingers full, which she presses into your throat, pushing her fingers past your tongue—covering it in soured dairy—lubrication for your throat as her fingers explore the back of your mouth fully until you cough it up as liquid. But her fingers keep fucking your throat, and tears come to your eyes.

You grab a scoop of the yogurt, and with messy hands you pull

her shirt down over her tits and slide slippery palms over her soft breasts, spit out her fingers and reach up to her body with your mouth, lapping the yogurt off her areolas, suckling them till she groans. You push her on her back and press your teeth against her hard nipples, getting firmer and firmer with pressure as she grips your hands. “Fucking hit them,” she yells, and your palms open, slam against the rise of her tits, white like cum spraying her face and your forearms.

For a while you lock eyes while you pound into her chest, keeping a rhythm, smiling while she screams “fuck you, fuck you, fuck you” while you grin, keeping an ear for her taunting to turn into something else. Palms turn into fists until red blushes against the brown of her skin. You stop, and she grins up at you. “Can I fuck you now?”

“Yes, you may—of course, duh!”

Clothes come off. The sweet easiness of trans intimacy, and the removal of the anxiety that always comes with undressing for cis people. You lay down, and she touches her fingers against warm cunt, turning around to rub her knuckles against your greedy hole, sliding it up to jerk off your dick. She grabs one of the melting ice cubes and rubs it down your stomach and around your labia, water dripping down to your ass. and then presses the disappearing slither into your burning hot pussy. “Mind if I use this as lube—it’s no sugar added?” You nod yes, and she dips her fingers in the yogurt, rocking them back and forth around your tight hole before pressing deep inside. Her finger tips press against your g spot, tapping it lightly, then pushing harder before thrusting back and forth, sliding her fingers in and out of you in a spiral.

“Fuck me,” you gasp as her fingers slide in, until all five are rocking back and forth against your cunt muscles.

“You loose fucking hole; I’m gonna give you my fist,” she sneers.

You say “yes please” as she rubs yogurt all over her hand and pushes her knuckles back in, bruising your taint, and then all in a second it squeezes through and her hand is a ball inside you. “One second,” you gasp, and she arches over you, her palm against your throat, and she kisses your messy mouth. You start to rock against her hand, and she clenches her fist loose and tight inside your swollen hole. “Fuck me please.” And her forearm, wrist deep, pushes out and against the back of your cunt. “Oh my god, fuck!” And you are helpless against the tension of her fist as it pulls almost

all the way out of your hole and pushes back faster and faster until your toes point to god and your chest rises as you cum: “Oh shit, oh fuck, oh god.” For minutes your body shakes in spasm, your voice crescendoing until she pulls out, and the thick white of the yogurt-lube is washed away by a spray of ejaculate that summons forward from somewhere in your body, arcing to splash all over her thighs and dick.

For minutes you are deeply inside your body, feeling every part pulsating with light and heat. Eyes closed.

When they open, her jam-covered pussy is lowering its way onto your face. The sweet seeds burst in your mouth as you press up and into her hole, sucking against her taint and fucking her with your tongue. She rides against your face, masking it with sticky sweet, grinding against your mouth while you suffocate on the joy of her cunt.

“Are you going to fuck me now?” she asks, voice sarcastic and sweet.

She climbs from her knees and stands in front of you while you lube up your hand with cool yogurt. You tap your fingers against the door of her pussy and then slide a finger in, feeling the warm tight pressure of her hole. She gasps and says, “Suck on my cock.” You spit against the head and draw it into your mouth, circling your tongue around the tip of her piss hole, while you slide another digit in and pull her toward you, finding the harder patch of tissue deep inside her and circling your fingers around it. She presses the back of your head deeper onto her dick and spit drips from your mouth, saliva glands drooling.

“Oh yes, yes please,” she says as you suck your cheeks in, vaccumming her cock up and down while fucking her pussy. “More—” And you pull your fingers out to scoop up more yogurt before sliding a fourth finger in, keeping the rhythm. Her breath fast and panting, she instructs you: “I’m going to cum—I want you to break those eggs on my cock!

Your free hand finds two eggs, and you crack them lightly against the floor before reaching back, as your head slides off her dick and your palm slams the eggs against her groin. She screams out “oh, fuck!” and her cock pistons clear cum in a spray across her stomach, bouncing back and forth in the air. Cum drips down her body while the yellow yolks slide down her thighs, painting her legs. She bends

to her knees on the mattress and falls face forward with a deep sigh. You look at her silently as her breath gets quieter over minutes.

Finally, she turns on her side with a grin. “So what’s the knife for?” “Um, maybe a kind of dumb ass idea.”

“What kind of stupid decision are we talking about?”

“I think I need to take a ho break,” you say. “And um—I kind of wanted you to cut me. I have had such a great time doing this and remembering what sex is like outside work, and I kind of wanted to do something that was a fuck you to the part of my brain that won’t let me do anything that interferes with my biz.”

“I can help you with that,” she says. “Get on your stomach! Stay there.”

You hear her leave the room and stomp up the stairs. She’s talking to people, mumbling in the living room above you. Is she telling them what just happened? You start to get nervous. Trust had felt so easy to build, but do you really know her?

Still, you stay on your stomach, and minutes tick past. Finally you hear her feet coming down the steps. She’s carrying a bucket.

“You’re in luck!” she says. “The bathroom up there has quite the supply.”

You smile meekly, not sure what words should come out, but you stay laying still, or almost. First she brings out a towel, and she wipes down your flesh, warm and wet, soapy. She cleans gently but thoroughly, and she dries with the other end of the fabric. Next, you can smell the sharp scent of alcohol wipes, which she rubs across the width of your shoulders.

“Okay,” she says. “I got an actual clean razor, but I’m not gonna go deep. You got any last words? Requests for mercy?”

You want to say yes, but you asked for this. And if you asked for it, you know that actually somewhere inside you really need it.

“I’m ready,” you grin. “But yeah, nothing that will scar deeply—or don’t write anything too weird.”

“Okay,” she whistles. “Nothing too weird.” She perches on top of your ass, with her dick resting against your back. “Let me know if I do anything to offend.”

She goes to work, and you find yourself in a place that’s intimate, but not sexual at all. Her hands move quickly, and the razor sliding through your skin has a touch that stings, but there is no ache of pain that follows it. Still, you can feel the viscous blood clumping

into pearls that drip down your back. You are alone in your thoughts, breathing through the feeling, breathing through the thoughts that bubble up but then spill out your ears, then just breathing. It's in longer than you expected, but fast enough to feel like a loss when she is done.

"How are you doing down there?" she asks.

You want to perform, you want to validate her. But from the body-brain stillness of this meditation, of exhaustion, you can only smile gently. "I really appreciate you doing that."

"You're welcome," she responds. "Now I know you are lying in all kinds of filth, but I want you to stay there. I will get your number from a friend—we'll be seeing each other again. But unless you need anything, I'm tired, and I'm going to leave and go home now. When I am gone, you can look at your back."

She kisses you on the small of your back. You close your eyes and say "Thank you." And in all the mess, you pass into sleep.



Late into the afternoon, you roll over to your side, eyes blurry but open, and you suck in the sour and sweet smells of sex and food that filter through the stale basement stench. Your back aches. There is a dusty brown mirror stuck to the wall, and you crane your neck looking backward to see the message. In inch long straight lines carved cleanly into your tan flesh, it reads HOOKER4HOOKER. In the room alone, you laugh to yourself, and you start to wipe the mess off the floor.

FEELIN MYSELF

VENYAMÍNA MACIVERRA

2032. LAVERNE “RHAELYN” JACKSON was sprawled out across the queen bed that she and Chesirée often slept in, out in Knoxville, Tennessee. Her back arched against the sky blue sheets, the sienna brown of her topless chest rising and falling with want as the fingers on her right hand pressed on opposite sides of her strapless. Her left hand tightly held her midnight hair, plaited into two braids, close to her neck. Rhaelyn slowed down the movement of her hand against her strapless, her back melting into the plush mattress, her moans declining in frequency and intensity. She liked calling her strapless a magic wand because the way it could make her feel was as glorious and inexplicable as magick.

Chesirée, her girlfriend, lay on her side next to Rhaelyn, watching Rhaelyn with her head propped up by her right arm.

“You’re hardly ever wanting of yourself like *this*, baby,” Chesirée purred. “You’re so beautiful ...”

She leaned over to the gorgeous masturbating woman next to her, kissed her forehead, and then returned to where she was lying as she watched, a smile spreading across her face. When Rhaelyn stopped looking at her, Chesirée wet her left hand with saliva and leaned forward again, quickly stroking the tip of Rhaelyn’s wand with her fingers, catching Rhaelyn off guard and causing her to cry out and moan. Chesirée settled back in place, grinning, as she watched Rhaelyn; Chesirée’s eyes were glued on her as she played.

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2015, Charlotte, NC. As a sophomore in charter school, Laverne—she wasn't going by her middle name at the time—sat on the steps to her family's apartment, garbed in her uniform: a blue polo and khaki pants. She stared at her colossal smartphone with droopy eyes. The sun faded into the horizon, casting the sky in beautiful orange and gold hues.

"Latron! Ayo, Latron." A familiar voice called out halfway down the street, cheery and energetic. Laverne's eyes darted from her phone towards the voice, and then retreated to an article on a recent Black Lives Matter protest in Baltimore.

The tall, lanky boy—her brother, Oscar—closed the distance between them, and then hovered in front of her. "I know you can hear me, man. Why it gotta be like that?" She felt his eyes on her. "Are you even listening, bro?"

She sighed, not looking back up at him, scrolling down the article. "You don't listen, O. I told you I'm going by Laverne now, okay?"

Oscar sat down next to her, peering over her shoulder at the article. "Oh, hell yeah! You reading about that, huh? People was stirring shit up even more in B-More after *that* news dropped."

She said nothing in reply, and Oscar waited for her to say something else. Then he cleared his throat and dug his hands into his pockets. Laverne felt his eyes wander away from her, maybe watching the street in front of them, as cars drifted by.

"Man, let me just be straight up for a *second*," Oscar finally said. "Like, I just don't get it. Why you wanna be called Laverne? That's a lady's name."

Laverne Xed out of the article on her phone as she reached the bottom of it, and then she tapped a game app, her eyes looking anywhere but his way. "Like I said, you don't listen," she said. "I told you I decided I'm a girl recently, and that's just, that's just how it is. Girls don't call themselves *Latron*, they call themselves *Laverne*. And I'm a Laverne. So, basically, O; I'm mad at you right now, okay? Leave me alone already."

Stretching in place, Oscar yawned. "Hold on, hold on. You can be mad at me, that's *fine*, but let me get just one thing straight. If boys is *Latrons*, and girls is *Laverses*, then what do I call my pet *lizard*?"

Laverne finally looked over at him and glared.

"Okay, yeah, I got it; not funny," Oscar said. "But, you see, dude, you see, the thing is, you look *strong* to me, you look like a brother, you know? I'm just having trouble understanding, is all, I guess. I don't get how you can *be* a man, but *wanna* be a girl."

Those last three sentences sent a dizzying wave of pins and needles through Laverne's chest, and she stood up abruptly, her head swimming with nausea.

"Jesus Christ, Oscar, are you for real trying to piss me off or something?"

She stormed up the concrete steps to her mom's apartment, leaving Oscar double-taking behind her as the screen door smacked against the outside door frame.

**

2032. Rhaelyn watched as Chesirée's head hesitated right next to her wand, her eyes glancing up at her hungrily. Chesirée's eyes were a striking amber brown, a pretty contrast to her darker, natural hair that was cut short in a bob, big silver hoops hanging from her ears. Watching Chesirée's strikingly beautiful appearance made Rhaelyn even wetter, and she reached out her hand to brush Chesirée's cheek, brushing it gently as those brilliant eyes stared hungrily back at her. Rhaelyn's other hand was still rhythmically running up and down her click, her strapless, when Chesirée brushed her hand aside and replaced it with her own, the excitement of her less familiar hand causing Rhaelyn to exhale sharply and moan noisily. "Fuck," she cried.

Chesirée gently brushed her lips several times against the uppermost parts of Rhaelyn's thighs, as her eyes gazed up at this overwhelmingly aroused woman, the unusual amount of comfort she seemed to be feeling. "Baby, you being so wet like this, *damn*, it just gets me so wet." Her mouth then sank onto her girlfriend's strapless, vibrating with a sensual purr that escaped from her warm, occupying mouth.

**

2029. Amy was a mischievous blonde baker, a Norse Reconstructionist pagan with an especial fondness for Sif, a fierce and assertive motherly goddess who shared her Rapunzel gold mane.

Rhaelyn had met Amy while she was in Durham, North Carolina, delivering the mail at the big circ hub there. She'd been cruising Durham for a place that gave out coffee *and* donuts, which had become difficult since the recent halt of most coffee shipments to North America—except for Zapatista coffee, that is. The Rock Solid

Sweets Collective was the exception to this dearth. A couple blocks away from North Davidson, one of the collective's volunteers was Hanapu, a Mayan girl who had a cousin in a Zapatista municipality that grew a decent deal of coffee and that would periodically send a couple bags of beans over to Rock Solid through the mail co-op routes.

At the suggestion of several passers-by on the street, Rhaelyn had visited Rock Solid early in the morning, around 10 a.m., when most people were asleep and the café was just opening. She then got her rare cup of coffee from Amy, who was volunteering that day, and the two immediately hit it off. Amy seemed impressed that this muscular, long-dreadlocked lady traveled far and wide to deliver mail in the far southeast of North America. On a horse, no less.

It was their second date. The two were in the middle of a terrifying horror flick, at Amy's suggestion, when Amy smirked broadly.

"Do you mind if I unbuckle your belt?" she asked Rhaelyn.

Rhaelyn was exhausted from traveling for several days straight, and after the second date, she was beginning to really warm to Amy, enjoying the end of the year-and-a-half dry spell of meetups and hookups she had been having. She didn't think to hesitate.

It happened so fast. "Holy shit. Holyy *shit*. Ew." Amy had gotten up abruptly, and was rushing towards the front door of her apartment, her leather jacket, strewn with punk and pagan-themed patches, clutched in her fist. "I don't *care* that you're some hotshot postiff. That's ... nasty. Wait, why am I lettin you chase me out of *my* place? It's mine. Get the fuck out, man ... just get the *fuck* out!"

After that whole experience, Rhaelyn felt a bit hesitant to hook up with white girls. It seemed they all were more likely as a whole to be Mary Daly separatists instead of queer-posi abolitionists like Angela Davis.

**

2032, earlier that day. Rhaelyn and Chesirée had just gotten home from tea with friends when they drifted to their bedroom and began to cuddle. The two had been together for a solid, loving seven months so far, but the horny-minded Chesirée had eventually learned that she needed to make space for Rhaelyn to heal from her traumas before they both could get down 'n dirty together. At least, that's the vibe Chesirée got from trying to make love to her girl. Rhaelyn's body and mind would both seem on high alert most

of the time, completely uninterested in sex.

Rhaelyn's healing process had begun with her redefining herself, deciding she wanted to go by her middle name. When she'd first come out as trans to herself, she'd chosen Laverne first, mainly because it was the first name she had associated with the freedom to be *her*, to be a realer version of her lost teenage self. But eventually, she came to associate the name Laverne with all the unfulfilling and underfulfilling relationships she'd had with people in her early and mid-twenties.

It had been Laverne who'd abandoned Latron Jackson on the corner of Hay and Pittman in Fayetteville, North Carolina, who *finally* got to wear pretty red lipstick, and yet who felt weighed down by the trauma and disappointment that plagued her growing up. But it was Rhaelyn who could be the grown-up, civic-minded woman who shared tea and herbs with passing strangers, who sipped black tea with other sisters and spoke up about the real shit happening in their lives, who was getting progressively readier and more able to make room in her heart for the brainy, sexy, older Chesirée Williams.

Chesirée had visited Sisitembea's post office one day over the winter, when Rhaelyn was on break, during the time when she'd sit at Sisitembea Collective's front desk for a handful of hours every week. It had been peculiar that Chesirée caught Rhaelyn while she was occupying the post office, because that winter had been the one where Rhaelyn took her self-care more seriously than ever before, her self-care cause taking the shape of reducing her volunteer shifts at the Sisitembea Post Office. She had been trying to make up for the hardy year of postiffing she'd just done, which had been so exhausting that she'd almost quit the collective once winter came. Instead, she resolved to game and read more frequently than ever before, and then she did it.

Three days later, when Rhaelyn had remarked to Chesirée about the sheer luck of their encounter, the gorgeous, short-haired writer and foodie smooched her on the nose and replied that it must've been fate. Or something.

As Rhaelyn's head lay sleepily against her bare chest, Chesirée hummed happily. Her girlfriend's waist-length locks smelled like a gorgeous combination of coconut and mango hair tea: what she knew was Rhaelyn's favorite. It puzzled Chesirée that this sleepy woman postiff on her chest had somehow managed to wash her hair with tropical fruits that grew nowhere near the southeast of the former United States, but she chalked it up to Rhaelyn's long term

history with Sisitembea. The mail collective was made up almost entirely of Black people. Their Points of Unity were explicitly all about repping the brilliance of African travelers, postpeople, and giftgivers, and its creation seemed to have been inspired by the history of Black postal workers like Mary Fields (a.k.a. Stagecoach Mary) and others.

It dawned on Chesirée, though, during this extremely soothing snuggle with her sweetheart, that she loved Rhaelyn deeply already, seven months in, and that she felt an extreme willingness to wait for Rhaelyn for as long as she and her traumas would need to heal. She didn't know much about what had happened to her, other than that she would immediately change the subject whenever Fayetteville came up and that her usual playful, tongue-in-cheek tone would sour whenever she updated Chesirée about dropping off mail in Durham. Being a writer, Chesirée perceived that Rhaelyn's bitter associations with particular places seemed like real-life allegories about how she rooted her traumas in places. Still, the most she knew about her baby's trauma was that Rhaelyn would get in a panic sometimes about her own body, seeming to consciously avoid looking at her own wand during showers, and that while she was open to having sex with Chesirée sometimes, while she could touch Chesirée's body with such ease, she immediately lost any trace of arousal when she noticed her own erogenous spots during sex.

Rhaelyn made a little questioning sound, raising her head and looking at Chesirée with sleepy eyes, and Chesirée was immediately brought back to the present moment, her worrisome thoughts banished by the sleepy, adorable woman in front of her. As Rhaelyn shifted in place against Chesirée's chest, Chesirée saw that Rhaelyn's wand had blossomed, noticeably stretching the fabric of Rhaelyn's sweatpants. Without thinking, her own horny indiscretion getting the better of her, Chesirée reached her hand forward and slowly rubbed Rhaelyn's cunt with the tips of her fingers.

"You should *touch* yourself," she purred in Rhaelyn's ear.

Then her eyes widened in horror as she noticed what she'd done. As quickly as she had moved to touch Rhaelyn, she apologized: "Oh, babygirl, I wasn't thinking, I'm sorry—" She sighed. "I really should've asked."

Rhaelyn's mostly closed eyes fluttered, and a grin spread across her face. "Oh, uh, I'm still waking up, kinda. You should've asked me. But, um." Rhaelyn's barely raised hand moved toward her cunt, faintly brushing it with her fingers as she moaned. "But it's kind of

a good idea, actually.”

“I’m still sorry,” Chesirée said, her sepia face set in a frown. “It just seemed like you were having fun down there, is all. I’ll try harder to check myself, next time.”

Rhaelyn sank further against Chesirée as a loud cry burst from her mouth. She began to breathe shallowly, her elbow occasionally brushing against Chesirée’s side as she slowly, sensuously, felt her own body, her cunt.

The guilty pangs Chesirée felt in her chest ebbed as she became transfixed by what her bae was doing. This kind of thing had never happened before. But whatever was happening, Rhaelyn seemed to be enjoying herself, and Chesirée definitely didn’t mind. Fearful of imposing or doing another disrespect to her girl, Chesirée resolved to hang back until later, when Rhaelyn invited her to participate.

Her attention was drawn to the wet curves of Rhaelyn’s mouth as it trembled, as pleased sounds escaped it.

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2016. The harsh glint of fluorescent lighting in the Fayetteville Police Station blinded seventeen-year-old Laverne as she stood in Booking, hands cuffed behind her back, with three of her friends: Laverne, Kim, Greg, Lashonda. They all weren’t graffitiing or nothin’ like the old white lady had said when she’d called the cops from across the street. “No, listen, we was just chillin, we ain’t been vandalizin or nothin,” Kim begged as the Black cop in front of the four teens stood behind a prominent desk, an inscrutable look of boredom on his face as he typed up the incident report on a desktop computer, white electronic glimmer brightening his earth-colored face.

At first, Laverne chalked her notice of the 5-0’s gaze, the one typing up the report at the desk in front of her, to the pounding heart in her chest, which was whispering all sorts of terrible nothings about what was gonna happen. But her worries about her application getting rejected by the United States Postal Service, or worse, her getting abused by the police, felt kinda confirmed when the man—Officer T. Star, Badge No. 5616—stepped away from the desk and approached her. Annoyance flashed against his face as he licked the insides of his mouth, dry maybe from big-brothering Fayetteville and filing mountains of arrest paperwork. Laverne’s eyes rarely left the pistol belted to his lanky waist. Her heart rate climbed.

"I'm sorry, ma'am," he rumbled, Laverne's mind drifting to All State ads as he spoke. "I'm going to need to do a category check."

Officer Star cleared his throat as he reached in front of Laverne, his hand confidently pulling the waistline of Laverne's jeans toward him as his head peeked inside her pants. At this point, Laverne's mind crashed, thought rendered impossible, rising nausea nagging at the back of her throat now.

"Yup," Officer Star said, stepping away. His right arm rose to his chest, his back turned to Laverne and her friends. *Beep.* "Hey Walker," Star boomed. "Need a minute."

A higher-pitched voice replied over the talkie static, accented by a Carolina drawl. "Walker here, Troy. What'd you need?"

Officer Troy Star shifted his head toward his left shoulder for a fleeting moment before he faced forward and responded. "Remember that DTP incident today at Mechanic and Chance? Turns out one doesn't belong in the F tank despite the name, and another one *looks* the part, but uh." Star chuckled under his breath. "Doesn't have the parts for the look. Did M tank get any room in the last few hours?"

In disbelief—in utter shock, in fact—Laverne's body sought to relieve itself of the pangful kind of ache that was bubbling in her head and her upper body. She only noticed that her face was boiling hot right after the tears began sliding down, and congestion climbed her throat as she cried silently. Officer Star looked after her as he waved down her friends, her team of same-gender loving and GNC homies. They slowly stepped forward, their richly colored hands chained together behind their backs. Greg glanced back at her, expressionless but for their own tear, verbally prodded forward by Star's command to hurry.

"It seems it'll be somewhat of a wait for you, little miss man," Star said. At this point, fear turned to rage, and Laverne felt the urge to knock this bully ass cop upside his head. "In the meantime, Officer McKinney, behind you, will assist you in taking a seat."

**

2032. Rhaelyn's body was flush, brimming with heat. She moaned loudly as her right hand alternated: slowly rubbing her wand up and down, fucking it hard and fast. It was excruciating how good this felt, how long it had been since she had felt at home in her body while aroused at the same time.

Chesirée verbally checked in with Rhaelyn about touching her.

When Rhaelyn nodded, her eyes closed, her cheeks on the verge of rosy. Chesirée situated her head above Rhaelyn's and, grinning broadly, kissed the ravenous girl she was leaning over. Rhaelyn felt a pleasant tightening of her body as she focused on Chesirée's wet, sweet-tasting lips, unsure of whether her partner was wearing lip gloss or something or if her lips were usually this sweet. Chesirée's very presence near her made Rhaelyn ache with want, made her enthusiastically kiss her back, the liquid sound of lips making lascivious, pleased contact that intensified the pressure she felt in her cunt, the heat building. Rhaelyn was forced to slow down the movements of her fingers on her cunt as she noticed her heartbeat accelerate, as the aroused firmness of her cunt felt so tense with pleasure that it could burst.

And then, in a kind of morbid way, her mind drifted to Oscar, her clueless but well-meaning brother who often didn't know what to say and showed it, and to Officer Star, the bully police who was essentially responsible for the drunken asshole who'd jumped her and beaten her in the "male" jail tank.

Rhaelyn whimpered, her anxious recollections making her stuttering heartbeat feel frightening instead of joyous. Then a hand stroked her head hesitantly, a soft hand that was steady, warm, soothing, a hand that could only be Chesirée's.

Her heart fluttered for a few moments more as this steady presence gradually soothed her triggered state, helped her shift back to being lost in the exuberant, heart-pounding thrill of her own body, her hand rising in speed as she fucked herself, as, somehow, she felt her own body, and she figured that at least for now, it wasn't so bad. Maybe, just maybe, it could even possibly feel good. Feel okay.

Rhaelyn then smiled a little, in the slightest way, before her hips started to feel like a pounding heartbeat, the pressure between her legs now set to burst. She cried out loudly, moans like dynamite charges as her body joined in, muscles tensing and involuntarily forcing her from lying to sitting as the warm flush of her arousal burst from her wand, drying her mouth of any wetness as the complete opposite happened near her active and now-exhausted hand.

The woman, spent from her stationery adventure, eased weakly back against the bed, a grin spreading across her face as Chesirée gazed at her, lay on her side to face her.

"I've never done that before," Rhaelyn breathed.

There were times that words flowed out of Chesirée's prolific mind with as much ease as is ever possible. But this wasn't one of them.

"That sure was *something*, baby," she said.

It seemed like a small event in the moment, maybe simply a sleepy transition from an involuntary afternoon nap. Rhaelyn would later discover that her other friends were more able to approach what scared them during that fragile but ripe space between sleepfulness and wakefulness, that muffing, or bondage, or fisting, or anything that their wakeful selves expressed interest in trying but could never seem to scare up the courage to approach while fully awake, while sober, was possible—reachable, even—when explored consensually during that twilight stretch, while half-asleep.

That day, Rhaelyn Jackson, courageous postiff in the streets but frightened girl in the sheets, noticed that she was feelin herself without any kind of reservation. That for the first time in like ever, in that fragile zone between wakeful and restful, between awful and beautiful, that she had found the opportunity to feel sexy. To listen to her body, and to have that rare moment where she savored it, didn't overthink it.

In that moment, Rhaelyn Jackson felt beautiful.

DEATH YOU DESERVE

RYLEY KNOWLES

IN MY DREAM I went into the deep web and looked at something that made my brain ache and my eyes burn, some curvy Lovecraftian mess of a symbol. Then I was facing something, something the symbol gave power to, Zalgo or the Midnight Man or the voice from Slenderman's absent mouth, and the voice said "Poor halfbreed," and I was stuck in that moment, looping it over and over, the big reveal that all this time I wasn't quite human.

It's 2:48 p.m. and Eve is at work. If I would've woken up a little bit earlier, I could have seen her off. If hadn't been stuck in that nightmare. I roll over and try to sit up. My heart is fluttering like a bird locked behind my ribs. My bladder is painfully full. The testosterone blockers make me have to piss all the time now, but at least it makes it easier to get my ass out of bed.

I'm alone, but there's still daylight, so I don't feel as afraid. Daylight death is rarer. A lot of horror movies start out this way, but there has to be some time to establish the character before anyone gets murdered. Knowing what point I would be at during any given point in a horror movie and finding little pockets of safety make me a little less afraid of being murdered. I am afraid of being murdered pretty much all the time, when I'm not afraid of being alive.

My therapist thinks I'm focusing on my fear of being murdered because it's a distraction from my fear of working on my independent project for school or of trying to talk to my parents or my fear of actually being murdered by boys that think killing me is some kind of public service.

My ex-therapist thought that me being a girl was a coping mecha-

nism since I told him that women have a higher survival rate in horror movies, that they either escape or die last, that when I was little I would pretend I was one of those Final Girls so that I wouldn't die. My ex-therapist taught me to never tell anyone anything. Eve says that boys don't "become" girls because they are afraid and that my ex-therapist was a transmisogynist.

We're low on food. My EBT came through four days ago, I think. If I was a good human I would go get food so that Eve wouldn't have to do something else after working a ten-hour day. If I was a better human I would even cook for her, have something ready for her. Instead I smoke half a bowl outside on the porch to flatten my nerves. As I breathe in, I remember that smoking weed means that I am going to be murdered. As I breathe out, I remember that you only get murdered if you smoke weed with other people at a party.

That's why I don't like to be around more than one person at once. Even three victims can make a movie. Two is too few, usually: it's harder to build up the tension without flatlining toward the end. I also don't like to be around people because most of them don't like me, or hate me.

I put some soy milk on the stove and make some vegan cocoa, figuring that the trace amounts of caffeine (estrogen blocker) will be balanced out by the phytoestrogen in the soy. Everything is about risk assessment. Everything usually comes back to the risk of being murdered suddenly and brutally at any given moment, but sometimes I am able to distract myself from that by gauging the lower-stakes risk. It kind of messes up my therapist's theory, but I don't know if I have the heart to tell her yet.

I spend the next couple of hours finishing off that bowl and working on my project. The nice thing about having a professor who will sign off on any half-assed concept I can put together, like, "The Transfeminine in Horror Media," is that I can get stoned half out of my mind and torrent videos and it's real credit work, a real, legitimate adult thing that I'm doing. It may be the only real, legitimate adult thing I can do well.

**

It takes me forty minutes to find that episode of *Friday the 13th* where the guy uses the cursed whatever to steal that female pop star's body. *I don't want you, I want to be you.* It's like the theft of life is less creepy than the perversion of wanting to be a woman.

And that transformation is never possible without body snatching or skinning cis women. Femininity is consumed the way vampires consume life. Those are the rules. Yet there's no comfort knowing that in a horror movie I would be the monster.

I fall asleep on the couch watching *Sleepaway Camp 3*. In my dream I'm in the deep web again. I'm looking for red rooms and snuff films. Finally, I find one. The victim has a pillowcase over her head; she is on her knees, hands tied behind her back. The room is flooded with bare fluorescent lights that scratch my eyes. The floor is concrete, with strange patterns on the floor. The camera pans up before I can take a closer look. The pillowcase is pulled off to show the big reveal that it's me, dead all along. That's when I watch them slash my throat.

I wake up, snap up like a car seat. My ribs vibrate and my eyes water. Maybe I need an adjustment to my medication. Or maybe I need to never sleep again. I pace the room and consider my options.

*
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Sleep deprivation is so classic. I can lean back against a wall and slide down dramatically while I drink Mountain Dew, just like Nicole Kidman in *The Invasion*. *Invasion* was not the best body snatchers film, but Kidman has a gift for hitting a perfect balance between strength and vulnerability. Thinking about Mountain Dew makes me have to piss again.

I don't know how long I was asleep. It's dark now. Twilight. Not dark enough to die, usually, but dark enough to signal death. I try to remember if anyone has ever been murdered going to the corner store in a horror movie. There was using the ATM in *ATM*, but that was past midnight in the middle of urban nowhere. Maybe the corner store will get robbed when I'm in there, and everyone will be murdered. Or maybe the longer I stay at home, alone and vulnerable, the more I am tempting fate to turn my life into a home invasion movie.

I bike to the grocery store. It's harder to murder people who're riding bikes. Most slashers have a killer on foot because it's more exciting that way; asking a killer on foot to run down a victim on a bicycle is less plausible, and more importantly, it's less exciting. Grocery stores are also less likely be robbed than corner stores; that's just an actual fact, not one of the eight thousand paranoid horror genre rules that dominate my life. I have on a heavy coat and a

hoodie, androgyny as path to anonymity and safety. I keep reaching into my pocket and touching my knife and cell phone.

Nobody looks at me at the store. I am nondescript and boring. I am safe. Nobody gets murdered while shopping for groceries. That just isn't a thing. This wouldn't even be filmed to be edited out later, not even in the most banal Twenty Minutes with Jerks sequence, unless it featured teens were hovering over the liquor section, or unless it was some inexplicable arthouse movie. I decide to stop thinking about it and text Eve about what kind of vegan pizza she wants.

I am eternally grateful for the automated check-out machines. There is no eye contact, no small talk, no double-take about my voice, and no lingering awkwardness where the cashier tries to divine if they should "sir" or "ma'am" me. There is only the comforting banality and indifference of our machine overlords.

I balance the groceries on my bike handlebars and pedal back. Everything is boring and normal. I am boring and normal. Boring. Normal. Boring. Normal. That's my chant. That's my charm. That's my invocation.

I'm climbing up the hill, calves aching. My bags bang against my front wheel. There's a knot of boys ahead of me, filling up the sidewalk. Normal. Boring. Normal. Boring. My breath hitches as I lurch my bike forward. Normal. Boring. This is normal and boring. I've played by the rules, and I'm safe.

All the boys have denim and leather jackets, baseball caps, well-fitting jeans, bright sneakers. They jostle and push against one another. Call one another faggots and laugh. They are comfortable and powerful in their raw, shapeless masculinity.

I push my bike off the sidewalk, clunking onto the street, and zip past them. There's another round of laughter. For a moment I wish they were zombies. I would feel safer if they were. I hear a yell and echoing laughter. My fingers burn as I grip the handlebars too hard. I force myself to keep my eyes forward, keep my face forward.

They didn't even notice me, I tell myself. I am boring and normal and utterly beneath their notice. Normal. Boring. My jacket was buttoned closed and my hood was up. Normal. Boring.

I pull up at the apartment, park my bike, and fumble with my keys. I am fine. Once I'm inside the apartment, I can stop arguing with myself about whether I'm really, really fine or not. As if a handful of bland homophobic dudebros who would be dead twenty-three minutes into pretty much any horror movie would really be any kind

of threat to me. I am ridiculous sometimes.

I hear the lock clack open. As I pop the door, there's a loud crash behind me, and I scream. I scream like I'm about to take a scythe to the neck or a chainsaw to my side or a gloved hand around my throat.

Nothing is happening. I'm crouching in the doorway doing nothing. And even though I've stopped screaming—at least I think I've stopped screaming—it's still going, the scream is echoing and vibrating in my head in a loop. It's a gif, it's a supercut, it's a soundbite. Nothing feels real when I am waiting to die. Not the carpet under my fingers or the keys digging into my palm. It's all fake. It's all scripted. And I can't escape. It's not the monster that's invincible, it's the narrative. There's nothing more harsh or cruel than stories. Nothing. Nothing.

The light outside the apartment flickers. There's a click-click-click, just outside the door. Click-click-click. Like claws or teeth. I'm stuck in place. I can't move. I can't think. I can't feel. I'm a celluloid woman, an image without will or spirit. The clicking loops and slows down. Click. Pause. Click. Pause. Click.

It's my bike. It's my bike wheel, spinning. Without my weight to steady the bike, the weight of my groceries on the handles tipped it over.

It was a cheap cat scare. I fell for a cheap, mindless cat scare. The kind of thing that wouldn't faze a ten-year-old. I am beyond ridiculous sometimes. An emotionally fraught young woman alone at night in her apartment waiting for her girlfriend to come home, a young woman who just jumped at a cat scare. Yeah. I'm sure that's fine.

I lock the door and check it twice. The door is locked. I unlock it and relock it make sure there's nothing wrong with the mechanism. The door is locked. It's still locked. I smack my shoulder against the door, and the frame doesn't even grunt. I rub my shoulder trying to calculate exactly how much muscle mass I've lost since transitioning, how much I've still got to lose when the most exercise I got was five-minute bike rides and chasing buses and sweating a lot for no reason. I slam my shoulder against the door, with feeling. Countless clusters of nerves packed in every square inch of skin lighting up. I didn't know I could feel so much. My head vibrates.

The patio is locked. The curtains are drawn. The outside lights are on. The patio is still locked. The curtains are completely drawn. The lights are still on. The front door is locked. My shoulder still

hurts. The patio is still locked. There is no one behind the curtain. There is nobody under the sink. There is nothing or no one in the refrigerator or the cupboards. There is nobody in the bathroom or behind the shower curtain. There is nobody under the bed. There is nobody in the bed. There is nobody in the closet. There is nobody under the bathroom sink or behind the shower curtain. There is nobody on the ceiling. There are no rats in the walls. There are no shifting rooms or hungry hallways. There is nobody in the house at all except me.

And Eve.

“Addy.”

I feel the scream in my gut like a burp made of pure panic. The scream spikes out of my throat and burns my breath. The scream was there and gone before I even realized what I’d done. “I’m sorry, sorry, sorry, so sorry.” I curl up and tuck myself between the toilet and the sink.

“I’m sorry too.” She slaps her boots on the linoleum floor and they echo. “I thought I made enough noise. Maybe I should take up singing. Or wear a bell?”

“No. It won’t help, and that wasn’t your fault. I was being too crazy. Tuning everything out. That’s how it works. Those are the rules. The fear gets the victim so scared, so focused, so paranoid, so vigilant, that they don’t even realize when the monster is right there. Ugh. This is the second time I’ve fallen for a cat scare.”

“I’m not a cat.”

“That’s not what it means! Ugh, the second time today in less than, like, an hour. I’m pathetic.”

“You are not pathetic.”

“I’m cowering on the bathroom floor. What would you call that?”

She pulls me to my feet and kisses my forehead. It’s nice to date a girl taller than me. It’s nice to date a girl at all. It’s nice to date at all. It’s nice to find someone who is worth risking the constant terror of death for. A death that, despite my every attempt to obey the ever-shifting rules of cinema, I most dearly deserve.

“You’re fine by me.”

She curls her fingers in my hair, kisses my eyes, my face. She is careful to avoid my mouth and my neck. She never questions me, never makes me explain myself, but of course she knows all about the reasons. After all, reasons are all I ever talk about.

Just existing is dangerous enough. Trying to actually fall in love like a normal person is just tempting fate.

Eve takes my hand and walks me to the kitchen. She makes me sit on the floor and tells me to empty my mind. She puts hand on my back, against my ribs, and she measures my breathing.

“Take a deep breath,” Eve says. I do. “Deeper. Hold it. Now breathe out.” I do. She makes me do this, over and over, for five minutes. “I’m going to create a circle of protection around you. Nothing can hurt you while the circle is intact.”

She takes out our canister of salt. There’s a long, static hiss as she pours it out. White lines on white linoleum.

“Does sea salt work better than table salt?” I ask.

She laughs and shakes her head. I feel calm, empty of expectation.

“You’re sure?” I tease. I feel normal. Or at least, my idea of a normal person.

“Yes. I’m sure. I did double-blind studies. Magic undergoes the most rigorous scientific methods known to humankind. Otherwise, how are we supposed to be taken seriously?”

I sit cross-legged and look up at Eve as she makes half-defrosted pizza. She tells me about customers with ugly tattoos, the one chef that keeps hitting on her, shitty metaphysical stores. She hands me a juice and sits down next to me, her back against the oven. She holds my hand: that’s definitely allowed, as long as my hand stays inside the circle. Those are the rules.

Eve is a witch, and witches know all about rules. More importantly, witches know how to make new rules. I can’t change the rules. All I can do is see the rules clearly, see where I am in the narrative and act accordingly. I can game the system to stay in those first twenty minutes, snatch up little pockets of time, over and over and over. It’s not easy.

But Eve, she makes it easier. She can rewrite the script for me when I need it.

She got some new indica strain at the dispensary, “Death Mask,” and she knows as soon as she tells me what it was called that she shouldn’t have told me what it was called. I’ve seen too many movies where drugs turn people into zombies. It’s a reactionary metaphor. If someone doesn’t murder me for smoking pot, the pot itself will murder me for being enough of a fool to smoke something with such an obvious zombie-making name.

“I can’t smoke it with you anyway,” I say, chewing on a dried-out pizza crust. “If I don’t smoke alone, I’ll die.”

“I didn’t just get this for me,” Eve says. “What if we rename it?”

“I don’t think it works like that.”

"It might." Eve runs her finger down my palm, tracing my life-line. Eve has the prettiest hands, painted black and purple, skull-patterns flaking off as if to say even death can die. She pulls out her dispensary baggie, and after a lingering pause, she laughs. "Here, I fixed it for you."

She tears off the stapled-on receipt and hands it to me. The receipt says *Gas Mask*. It's innocuous enough for me. I sigh-laugh, and she laughs. She catches my face in her hands and kisses my eyes. I kiss around her jaw, her cheek, and her eyebrows.

Eve is a witch. She bleeds truth and sweats prophecy. I am definitely in love, and definitely in danger. Lust alone can kill me.

I feel with my mouth where she's hard under soft tissue. I think about shape of her skull under her skin, the skull under my skin, our skeletons floating in flesh. I think about sliced-up flesh, dark spills, meat hooks, raw, fresh bones, and I stop kissing her. She stops kissing me.

"I'm sorry," I mumble out automatically, and I bite my tongue to stop the second apology, the meta-apology, and then I-should-know-by-now-not-to-apologize-for-my-own-boundaries apology, to be followed shortly by the I'm-sorry-for-being-so-crazy apology. I'm backed up on apologies. I'm almost choking on them. "I'm—" "You're fine by me."

We're holding hands again. My hand is trembling, and I have to pull her closer to me so I don't disrupt the circle of salt.

"Am I really safe?" I ask.

"Safe as houses," she answers, and all I can think of are animal-masked intruders hovering in hallways, broken windows, and snapped phone lines. She looks at me a moment before adding, "Safer, actually; much safer than houses."

"Can we kiss?" I bite my lip, and I feel a little smaller, a little younger, each passing second. "On the mouth?"

"Addy, you don't have to push yourself for me."

"If I'm in the circle I'm safe, right?"

"That's not why I did that for you. I don't want you to think I'm doing magic so we can—I'm not trying to, to coax you into anything."

"I know it's not, Eve. I know, I know, I know. You wouldn't manipulate me like that. You never have. The circle is safe, right?"

"It's safe. Nothing can harm you."

"I want to kiss you," I blurt out. "If you want to kiss me, I mean. Otherwise I wouldn't, uh, want that, unless it's consensual, mutual,

and I'm explaining a bunch of things that don't need to be explained, I'm a huge dumbass, I'm sorry, I'm messing up everything—”

“You're fine by me.” Eve kisses my nose. “And you aren't a dumbass, and you didn't mess up anything.”

She leans in close. Her hair spills out around me in a dark wave. Her breath smells like pesto.

I know she's waiting for me to close the gap, meet her halfway, because she wants this to be my decision, my choice, always. There are times I wish she was little less considerate, a little less careful. There are times I wish I didn't have the burden of choosing to tempt fate. Maybe we'll figure out something, a compromise. There must be some way that I can signal that she can be the one who chooses, that I choose for her to choose. But right now my tongue is heavy and my thoughts are in knots. One of my legs is shaking, hard, so hard I'm afraid I'll start phasing through the floor. She puts her hand on my knee, and it goes stiff under her touch.

“Kiss me? Please?” I manage, through some awkward miracle.

She finally leans in and kisses me. She tastes like pesto, vegan cheese, and orange lip gloss. The feeling of her mouth on my mouth is almost distressingly normal. Closed mouth. No tongue. Soft lips over muscle, over teeth. It's not the dizzying height of ecstasy; it's not a wretched vice that would summon some ancient creature of wrath. Just nice. She feels nice. Soft. Warm.

We keep being nice and soft and warm in each other's faces. I brush my face against hers. Her peach fuzz curls catch on my skin. I don't think about how I'm two years behind her on HRT. I don't think about my stubble. I don't think about her softness against my sandpaper skin. Her magic can make me forget my terror. Her face is perfect and real, and it's enough to let me forget my ugliness. I'm not sure at what point kissing stops just being kissing and starts being making out, but I suspect we are quickly approaching it. Eve is making little squeaking noises that I've never heard her make before.

Eve steps into the circle, and I wrap my arm around her waist to steady her.

It feels like we're dancing—her fingers hook my flat hips, I pull her tighter against me—as we're trying to occupy the same space. The circle of salt is unbroken. My face is wet with her breath. My breath is caught in my chest like a fly in a web.

I wonder if this is a kink, a coping mechanism, or just plain old magic. From what I hear from some people, there's not that much of a difference between the three. Whatever it is besides, it's defi-

nitely magic. A curse-breaking, taboo-smashing work of wonder. Just like her.

We're thigh to thigh, hip to hip, chest to chest. There's a tattoo peeking out of her shirt collar, a tendril climbing up her collarbone. There's a lot of Eve I've seen but that I haven't seen, that I haven't let myself see.

"Can I kiss your neck?" Eve asks. I nod, my head hazy. I can almost feel the shadow of the angel of death against my back. And when she kisses my neck, the shadow is gone. She kisses me with the same gentleness again. Her mouth is soft, warm, no tongue and no teeth. Undemanding. I imagine most people, normal people, wouldn't find this exciting. But for me, the most inconvenient parts of my body are becoming more inconvenient by the second.

I'm hard, I'm hard and it's trapped in my jeans and trapped against her leg, and we're too close together for her not to notice.

"Uh," I swallow. "Um."

I look down at the circle again. Still intact. I look again. Intact. Normal. Intact. Safe. Normal.

"Yeah?" Eve asks.

"I, um ... do you want to?"

"Do you mean sex?"

I nod and then shake my head and then nod again. She laughs and kisses my forehead before kissing my neck again, kissing up my jugular and the soft shell of my ear. She whispers into my ear.

"Do you want me to touch you, or ..."

I take one of her wrists because I think this is what people do when they can't talk or don't want to talk. It's less about spontaneity or romance than that I just can't talk, that I can't stand to think about my body long enough to talk about it. I tug her hand to my fly. Eve seems to understand, and she nuzzles her face against my throat. Then there's buttons clicking and zippers unfolding and waistbands stretching, and then—

Eve's hand is soft; Eve's lips are soft; Eve's everything is soft. She's soft and I'm hard, painfully solid, and I feel like I'm sinking into her hand, like my throat is sinking into her mouth, my whole body folding into her. Vertical quicksand. I'm standing shock still, but I still feel like I'm in motion. Like I'm a ghost unhitched from my body. My body feels invisible. I am somewhere else now.

Now I'm here again. I'm soft. Empty. Visible. Corporal. I reach up and feel my unslit throat, my unbroken bones. The circle of salt is intact. I'm safe. I'm alive. All I can manage is these little halfLaughs

of relief. Eve kisses my forehead.

Once I leave the circle, am I still safe? Do I have to carry my un-virginal nature with me? Does it have a smell, or an aura; some other tell? Can I continue to dodge the gaze of the gods of cinematic bloodshed and slaughter? Or will it get worse now: stronger, more cunning, that death I deserve crouching at my door?

Eve helps me to step out the circle with my trembling, newborn giraffe legs. We clean up dinner together. I help her sweep up the salt, now inert, all of its protective energy expended. We lay in bed, our bodies not quite touching, and we watch *Suspiria*. Tomorrow everything starts again, but tonight I survived. In my dream I see the long roll of end credits, breathy end music fracturing into static, fizzling into blue screens.

A CLEAN SHIRT

ALLISON KAPITEIN

HE ENTERS THE TRAIN at the airport station, but he doesn't carry much. Still, a crisp and clean suit. Short trip to London?

He doesn't look bad, though he's probably at least fifteen years older than me. Gray hair, light eyes, not very tall. Nice jawline, just a little stubble on it. Nice body ... not so groomed he looks gay. The look that says he still works out, no fuss, just because it's a good idea, though it won't get him a six pack anymore like it used to.

Under that clean shirt, some of his chest hair is probably gray.
For some reason, that arouses me.

I observe how he takes some reading material out of his briefcase. A bit too closely, maybe, because he glances my way.

I look away. The window in the tunnel doesn't show anything but my own reflection. Without thinking, I take off my cap, softly, slowly caress my new, short haircut into place again. I should probably stop wearing caps at some point in my life.

I feel him take another look, now that he thinks I'm not watching.
I don't get why. I'm pretty fuckin' sure I look like a dyke.
I'm not. Well, not ... exactly.

Oh, wait, I get it. I have to get used to it, with this new haircut. I've noticed the confusion I cause since then. It makes people look twice.

As soon as we're out of the tunnel, he makes a phone call. Friendly, to thank someone, insisting to thank someone for something. He slouches a bit on the bench, his elegant leather shoe tapping the floor as he talks and smiles into nowhere. He glances over now and then, aware that he's talking in a public place. His other hand plays

with the crease in his pants.

I like his voice. I like his hands. I like his attitude.

I probably stared too much this time for real. He finishes his call, smiles at me apologetically. I can't help but grin back. He is sexy.

"Sorry, sometimes you just have to force someone to take a compliment."

"Yeah, no problem," I answer. "It's more fun to hear than fighting."

I smile sheepishly. His expression shows he is surprised. Yes, I know. I know I have a sweet, sultry voice. It makes it instantly clear why my chin is so smooth, my facial features more delicate, my hands so small. I wonder if he likes this new information.

He looks at me, intensely. A hint of a smile plays over his face. Yes, there you go, he sees it. A silence falls, quickly approaching awkward. My cockiness disappears fast.

"Absolutely," he says. "Nothing like making someone happy with the right words."

He turns to his papers again. I might be imagining it, but he seems to be suppressing a smile. God, I thought I was good at spotting flirting, but I have no idea what that means. Whether it's amusement or condescension, I can't tell.

A well-dressed lady with a small suitcase scurries by. She's one of the last people to look for a seat. She doesn't notice me, exchanges a smile with him and chooses a seat not far from ours. His eyes follow her appreciatively, cling to her ass. I watch him with amusement. It's interesting to see this tiny crack in his professional exterior.

Yep, straight.

Fuck. I like straight men.

By now I curse myself a little.

Why do I keep making these paradoxical choices, expecting them to work out? If I followed the rules it would be easy. If I want to look like this, I should date girls. But here I am, looking like this, sitting a few seats from a man who ogles pretty women's shapely asses, and I want him.

If I want men, *straight* men to want me, I should stop wanting to look like one.

At least, that's what my last boyfriend said. And that was even before I cut my hair. It was just because I stole his ties.

Borrowed, really. He made such a fuss about it. *Where's my blue striped tie?* Nag, nag. With that condescending air he had. Childish. Yeah, it was stupid to hide them in my bag in the morning, tying them on the train, because it creased them and that annoyed the

crap out of him. But I only did that because he wouldn't let me take them in the first place.

They looked good on me! Jeez.

And, okay, I stole his shirts as well. I loved them, those clean button-down shirts. He hated that I did that, because my boobs stretched them in an ugly way.

I agreed with him on *that*.

Ridiculous reason, though, not to want to fuck me all of a sudden. It's not like I was so girly when we met, after all. Though I guess the real cause was him *being a douche*.

He might've been right, though. What straight man likes girls who look like me?

Still, the first thing I did after we broke up was buy some ties of my own. And next, a binder.

I take a deep breath, fold my arms, and look out of the window at the hypnotic, straight lines in this cultivated evening landscape. The polders stretch out to the horizon smoothly, like well-made hotel beds. Patches of houses, gardens, placed around neatly like folded clothes in a closet. I think of my ex's button-down shirts. I wish I was wearing one of them instead of the random T-shirt I threw on this morning. Those crisp shirts; white, gray, striped. I so wanted him to fuck me in them. I craved his hands sliding over the fabric that covered my chest, grabbing my tie. Someone taking me like that, hard. I push away the painful memory of the one moment I tried that, of his disgusted expression.

Jesus, take it off; you are disturbing. I'm not gay! What's next, you're gonna ask me to wear panties, huh?

Like any of that would be a problem.

Seriously though, why do I even replay these scenes? Screw him. There must be someone who thinks this is sexy.

Someone besides me.

Quietly, I rub the sore spot my binder has created on my ribs today. I feel a little fucked up and very horny.

The sun is setting. I look forward to arriving home so I can masturbate, thinking of unbuttoning the shirt of this man who sits across from me, just to see his gray chest hair. I hope he has a treasure trail.

I will think of his hands, those strong, elegant hands grabbing my hair, touching my face, holding my head in place as I suck him off. Of his toes curling up, the tension in his thighs, when I take him deep. Of that voice of his, calling me a good boi, such a

good, good boi.

My shorts are getting wet.

"Excuse me, sir." The pretty lady from before has risen from her seat and addresses the business man with a flirty smile. "Do you know how long it takes before we reach Central Station?"

"No, sorry," he says. "It's my first time traveling here as well."

Then he looks over to me.

"Maybe that gentleman knows, though."

I'm caught by surprise. He *knows* I'm not. He's just seen it, heard it. Right?

Automatically, I start: "I'm not a—"

But I stop, because when I look him in the face, I see his face suddenly break out in a smile I didn't expect. I'm not sure whether it means what I think it means, but it means *something*.

Actually, I do know what it means. In this fleeting, blushing exchange, he has picked up some strange clue of what I am—or rather, am not. Not a boy. Not a girl. Not a boy again. And it amuses him.

I look at the lady, who is wondering about what just happened here, and I answer her. "I'm not—exactly sure. But it's probably about twenty minutes from here on."

She's confused by my voice and looks, clearly, but she doesn't want to show it. She glances over to him, back to me, quickly thanks me, and goes back to her seat.

I bet she even forgot what I told her.

Twenty minutes.

Yes, twenty minutes, twenty fucking goddamn horrible minutes to think of what she must be thinking about me. To regret my fuckin' visit to the hairdresser last week, my fashion choice of this morning, and everything else. If only I had kept that messy ponytail. Oh, man, what I would give to have this space to my own again right now.

Because what's even worse: what he just did gave me an incredible rush.

When we exchange looks again, I have lost all my swagger. I want to crawl under a rock.

But then he winks—did he just *wink?*—and softly he says: "You're welcome."

Oh, what the fuck.

I stare out of the window, but the landscape rushing by isn't offering any solace. It goes on and on and carries my dirty thoughts,

stitches them together like a sewing machine.

His teeth on my chin.

My chin in his hand.

His hand traveling down to my boxerbriefs.

My boxerbriefs shoved down my legs.

My legs twitching against his fit body.

His body pressing me into the mattress.

The mattress getting wet from my cunt.

My cunt stretching around his large ...

The voice of the lady announcing the arrival at Central Station is almost lost on me. My brain has turned to cotton fluff. Coming back to reality is hard. Standing up is hard. I straighten my T-shirt, zip up my hoodie, hoist up my jeans and my wet boxerbriefs. My body awkwardly does what I ask it to.

He gets up as well. I shoot him a crooked grin. Christ, I'm horny. I wonder if he can tell.

Every sound is amplified; my senses are heightened in some way. I'm so aware of the bodies around me. I feel him close. We don't exchange a word. Waiting for the doors to open with the other travelers, I feel like I'm standing there together with him, as if we're traveling companions. My heart beats in my throat.

I hope nobody can smell my arousal.

On the platform, I can breathe again, find my cool again. The evening air is cold and soft and dark like black silk sheets.

He walks next to me with his modest suitcase. Casually, like we know each other. As the lady with the suitcase walks past, hoping in vain for some eye contact, he says to me: "Show me where the cabs are."

Is he commanding me, or am I leading him?

When we get to the cab, I know what is going to happen. I've been dangling the key of my bike lock in my hand for some time now. My bike is behind the station. This is play. At least for me it is. We're testing each other.

"Share a cab with me," he says.

I play with the keys in my hand, deliberately, for just a second too long. I shoot him a mocking, defying look, from under my cap. He stares back. It makes my knees go weak.

It was not a question.

Wordlessly, I get in.

He doesn't ask me where I need to go. I don't tell him either. I don't tell him anything.

The silent city glides by behind the glass, its streets lit by neon and decorated with people, framed in the window like it's fashion photography on the pages of edgy magazines. Far away, gritty, yet inexplicably desirable. Slowly, with every turn, I feel myself slip a bit more. His quiet demeanor, his sternness, the way he just takes me with him, it's overpowering. I want this. I want to not have a choice. I want whatever he's going to do to me.

When we get to the hotel, it's not play anymore. I hold my foolish questions, the stupid small talk, like I've held my tongue the entire drive. My mind has as little to say as my mouth. I get out, follow him inside, avoid everyone's eyes. My heart thumps in my chest.

"He's with me," he announces to the hotel clerk behind the reception desk. I keep my head low, hide him behind the visor of my baseball cap.

As we step into the elevator, while pushing the button to the top floor, he speaks.

"You're a rare find, you know that, kid."

I shift my weight to my other leg. I'm not sure if he wants me to reply. He doesn't look at me. It's like he never spoke.

Until he says: "And I'm guessing, since you're still here, that feeling is mutual."

His face breaks into a sexy, naughty smirk. He glances at me, a bit apologetically. Loosens up. Finally. I grin back, blush a bit.

"Well, *yeah*," I mumble, raising an eyebrow. "Talk about rare finds."

At the top floor, the doors open to a well-dressed couple waiting to go down. They nod at him and stare at me. We try to suppress our smiles. To them, it must be a curious sight: a distinguished gentleman in a suit, and a boyish girl—or a boy?—in sneakers and a baseball cap, here, in this expensive hotel.

"They think you're gay," I tease him.

"They think you should be wearing a suit," he replies. He opens the door to his room. "And I agree." He winks; he looks me up and down. "I am gay like that."

The way he looks at me makes my stomach flutter.

He closes the door; he pushes me against it. His hands rest on my shoulders, keeping me there. I stare in his eyes. His eyes twinkle. I bite my lip. God, he is sexy, so fuckin' sexy. I just want to drop down on my knees and unbuckle his belt.

He presses his body against mine. Yes, he's very fit. Softly, his tie rubs against the zipper of my hoodie. My hands go to his hips to pull him in. I want so badly to feel his crotch, hot against mine,

his cock growing in his pants.

“Oh, are we a little eager, kid?” he grunts, grinding himself against me. I blush. His condescending tone turns me on. I can smell his aftershave.

He takes off my cap. His hand moves through my hair.

“So there I am on the train, and this boy sitting across from me turns out to be a girl. So cute. All boyish nonchalance. She must be a lesbian, like they always are, I thought. Which is a shame, really ... because I have a *thing* for women like that.”

He draws out the words, watches how they arouse me, make my breath tremble.

“But you—you kept staring at me with those big, hungry eyes of yours. And then I realized you aren’t any of those things. You aren’t a dyke—”

He caresses my red cheek; his fingers linger on my jawline as he stares me in the eyes sternly. My breath becomes shallow.

“You’re a *faggot*.”

Jesus, fuck, I cringe at that. But he ain’t wrong, really.

He closes in, his nose softly against mine, our lips almost touch.

“Just like me,” he says.

He takes my chin in his hand, firmly. I can taste his breath. I can see the lines in his skin. His face looks rough in this light, forbidding. I want him, but I don’t dare move.

“And I’m *way* too old for you.” He smiles an irresistible smile, creasing his face. “But I’m starting to think you *like* that.”

Apologetically, I grin back. “Yeah,” I mumble. Yeah, I like it. My hands play with his tie, with the jacket of his suit. “I have a—a *thing* for men dressed like you.”

“Oh, you like my suit, huh?” he whispers against my lips. “I wonder how it looks on you.”

The idea that he wants to see me wearing his clothes blows my mind. Involuntarily, I moan. My mouth wants to taste his, I lick my lips. But he doesn’t give in yet. I can almost feel the cool cotton against my skin.

“You’ll probably look like you’re playing dress up in your daddy’s clothes. Did you try on your daddy’s clothes when you were young, hmm?”

I blush hard. He pushes into me, his hand softly on my throat, his lips against my face. I can feel his hard-on pressing into me. He likes that idea—he likes it a lot. He chuckles.

“Tell me that little secret, girl. Did you? His shirts? His *boxer*

shorts maybe?"

I can't answer. I really can't.

"Now be a good boi and let me see what's under these clothes," he grunts.

I can almost taste how he shortens that vowel at the end, it rolls around in my mind like a smooth button that finally came off a garment. I love that he calls me boi—I fuckin' love it.

He undoes some buttons on my jeans. I lift my shirt to give him access. He takes a look at the gray checkered boxerbriefs I bought at the men's department of a large warehouse. I feel exposed.

"You're such a dirty little crossdresser," he says. "Aren't you?"

I lower my eyes, because I probably am. I'm not a boy, I just like to pretend I am one. So I guess I am one of those freaks, a pervert who has a thing for wearing men's clothes. But I can't help it.

"Well, aren't you?" he asks. He grabs my chin again, makes me look at him.

Fuck. Shame wells up inside of me. I try to hold back tears.

I've detested this most about myself. The craving for anything masculine. Not knowing, when I wanted a man, whether I wanted to have him or to be him. Or both. And then some boy would let me in, and I'd end up raiding his closet.

It's always been this messed up ball of sex and fetish and gender confusion, a lot of gender confusion. Until I didn't know whether I was really still female inside.

I still don't know, for fuck's sake.

But as I stare in his eyes, I suddenly feel the relief of being seen, recognized, for the first time.

Finally, I nod.

"Yes, Daddy," he spits out.

"Yes ... Daddy," I say, under my breath.

Christ. Did I just say that? This is crossing a boundary, but I crossed it. I curse him for turning this into play. It's not how I am at all. Or am I? Blood rushes to all kinds of places now. I feel guilty for loving this, but apparently I do.

"Good boi," he calls me. I shudder. Finally he kisses me, with a demanding mouth, hard, deep, the stubble on his chin scraping my skin, his tongue in control of me. So satisfying, so arousing. It goes straight to my clit.

Shit, I'm really lost. He pushes all my buttons and some more I didn't know I had. Whatever he's going to ask me, I will do it.

He unzips my hoodie, explores my chest, like he just bought

a new toy. He can feel the binder pressing down my tits, I know he can. He pulls up my shirt; his hand slips under it, caresses my belly, plays with the elastic of my tight top, slides over it. He rubs me where my nipples strain against the fabric, with a flat palm. He scrutinizes my face.

I can't help but tremble. My god, nobody has done that before, and it feels incredible. My nipples are sensitive, restrained like this. He's getting me worked up. My knees start to give in.

My hands move to his belt, but he grabs my wrists.

"Let me suck you off," I say. "I want your cock."

"Ask for it," he says, and he smirks. "I like that sweet voice of yours."

For a moment, I hesitate.

"Please, let me suck your cock?"

"Please what?"

Oh god, he's going to make me say that.

"Come on, you know how to ask properly now," he says. His hand caresses my chin. He kisses me softly. All my defenses are stripped down, as he whispers: "Ask me properly, boi."

"Please, Daddy," I say softly. "Can I suck your cock?"

"Good, very good." He pushes me down to my knees.

He really is a gentleman pervert, with the fly of his gray suit open, his white briefs pushed down a little so he can free his cock. He firmly grabs my hair, and he pushes his cock against my mouth with the other.

"Open up," he grunts.

I obey, and he pushes in, sliding over my tongue, into my throat. His hand cups my chin. He smells clean, good. He slides back until the head of his dick is on my tongue. I can taste his precum, salty, warm. I moan around him, want to touch his balls, but he pushes my hands away, tells me to keep them behind my back.

Holding my head in place against the hotel door, he slowly fucks my mouth, carefully, but deeper every time, and just a bit rougher, testing how much I can take.

"Oh you're a good boi. Such, such a good boi. This is so good," he says.

More and more, he makes me choke on his cock. First just a little. And a little more after that.

"You can take it," he whispers. "Can't you?"

Oh man, it makes me shudder. Yes, yes I can. God, I fucking love it. I love it. Until my moans start to be whimpers, soft, girly

sounding, unintelligible, worried cries, and I don't think I can take it anymore.

"Yes you can," he keeps telling me, as his fingers take a new grip in my hair. "You can handle it. Come on, little boi, show your Daddy how deep you can take his cock."

Fuck. Saliva and precum drips down my chin, on his hand. Tears start to drip down my cheeks. It's intense. I hope he stops before my gag reflex ruins it all.

And then he pulls me up. He kisses my sticky, used mouth.

"God, you're amazing," he sighs. He starts to take off his pants. "Take off your jeans and shorts," he tells me. "But not your shirt."

Shedding clothes, he pulls me towards the bed, and before I know it, I'm straddling his naked legs.

He slouches back against the headboard, watching me. He hasn't taken off his shirt and tie. It's a strange contrast to feel my naked, wet pussy against his cock while we're both still wearing clothes. His hands slide over my legs, up to my waist and higher up my torso. His thumbs rub my chest through my shirt. I feel like I should be ashamed, instinctively, but he appreciates my chest like this. I keep forgetting he likes it as much as I do.

My legs are sticky. My face is sticky. I feel dirty.

Licking his lips, he sits up and pulls me against him. He loosens his tie.

"I want you to unbutton my shirt," he says, and his mouth touches my chin.

My fingers fumble with one of the buttons. He's not wearing a shirt under it. With a rush, I remember my daydream about his silver chest hair. I want to see it, feel it.

Slowly, sensually his tongue slides over my smooth chin, licking his precum off my face. Holy shit. I can't concentrate. I feel my pussy drip on him.

Another button goes; the curly hair on his chest tickles my fingers. I writhe in his lap. God, I want him to fuck me. Please.

"Please," I try.

He laughs, looks at me expectantly. I know what I'm supposed to do.

"Please ... please fuck me, Daddy," I try.

I see he's trying a stern look, but the amusement shines through.

"No," he says. "Unbutton my shirt."

It seems to take forever, those soft hairs teasing me as I work down his button down shirt, while he watches me suffer. Finally,

I'm done. I slide the shirt off his shoulders, revealing his strong body, and yes, a trail of hair, dark and silver, in the middle leading down to that cock I want so much.

"Thank you," he says. "Now take off your T-shirt."

I pull it off over my head. Timidly, I sit there. The only piece of clothing left on us is my binder, and I'm hoping he won't make me take it off. With a caring gesture, he takes his white shirt and wraps it around me. It smells like him. It arouses me. As he buttons it down, I feel small, like a kid who can't get dressed yet. The shirt is a bit too big.

"There's a good boi," he whispers in my ear. In his hand, he has his tie.

"Show me what you can do with it, and you'll get your reward."

I wonder what he means, but when I take it, wrap it around my neck, I feel him pushing his cock against my wet pussy. Oh god, god yes. My hands stop doing what they were doing.

"Come on. Don't you want your reward? Or don't you know how to tie a tie?"

"Yes I do," I say, a bit defensively. "To both."

I smile, but he doesn't return it.

I start again, measuring the thin end so I can tie a double windsor. Usually I do this without thinking, I've done it so many times. Now, aware I'm watched, I am afraid I mess it up. He looks at me closely, with curiosity, his hands on my hips. As soon as I make the first wrap, he pushes in. Hard. Deep.

"Fuck, goddamn." I slump against his bare chest. "Jesus, fuck, yes. Thank you—thank you, Daddy." The words seem to come so easily now, like I'm used to saying them, like I've always called the men I fuck Daddy. I never have, but I want to now. I grind myself down on his cock, so happy to have him inside, finally. A strong hand caresses my back, holds my head. His face is in my neck.

"Go on."

Man, it's almost impossible. Every thrust of his cock makes me pause, lose concentration. I sit there, on top of him, our foreheads almost touch. He seems so in control, although by the way he breathes, I can sense how much this does for him. While he's inside of me, fucking me slowly, I tie the tie the way it's supposed to go.

When I'm done, he adjusts it tightly around my neck. A bit too tight.

"Look at you," he says. "Don't you look sharp now ..."

He touches my tie, slides his hands over my chest.

“... and handsome ...”

He caresses my chin, gives me sweet, soft kisses.

“... and *fuckable*. ”

He rolls us over. Throws me on the bed. I want him in me; I want that good, hard fuck he’s teasing me with all this time.

“Yes, please fuck me, Daddy. Fuck me ... God, fuck me!”

I beg him, I need it so much. My legs wrap around him to pull him in. But he doesn’t let me. He pushes them apart, moves back a little.

“You want me to fuck you? Let me take a look at what’s between your legs, then, hmm?”

He draws a finger over my wet pussy lips. I feel exposed; my wetness feels cold in the air. I look at his hard cock, glistening from being inside of me. I want it back inside of me.

“What’s this, then,” he says. His finger teases my hard clit. “Is that a dick, boi?”

No, of course it’s not. I’m not sure what he’s on about.

“Answer me.”

“No.” I bite my lip. “It’s a clit.”

He chuckles.

“That’s what I would say if I had a tiny, useless dick like that.”

Wow—I don’t know whether to feel insulted or aroused. I guess I feel both, because my clit swells a bit more under his fingers. He pinches it and plays with it, just a bit too hard. It makes me squirm. It feels good.

“I think it’s time for you to learn what a real dick can do,” he says, stroking his cock. “Somebody’s got to teach you, after all.”

He slides on top of me, grabs my tie in one of his hands. It pins me to the mattress. I feel it strain around my neck. He looks down on me, stares me in my eyes.

“Do you want me to teach you?” he whispers. His cock rubs against my pussy. “Do you want your Daddy to teach you what a real man is like?”

“Yes!” I hiss. “Yes, goddammit, fuck me already!”

“Now, now—where are your manners.” He smirks. I grunt, try to pull him in. I’m frustrated, but he seems to love it.

“I’m not gonna teach you if you don’t ask for it nicely.”

Christ, I hate him.

“Please,” I grunt, with clenched teeth. “*Daddy*. Teach me.”

“Good boi! You’re learning fast—”

And finally, I’m getting what I want. He pushes into me, hard and deep. Rougher than before. I want it so much I scream. And

he doesn't stop. I had no idea he could fuck me so hard.

My hands pull on his hips, grab his back, the gray hair on his head, as he ravages me with a determined look on his face. His hand pinning my tie to the mattress next to me restricts me, restricts my breath almost, in a very arousing way. I'm turning into a moaning mess of trembling legs and shaking arms. It's hard, rough, fast. It's clear that this is about what he needs, not about what I want. He doesn't want to take breaks, and he's not giving me any.

He's using me. And I love it.

He grabs my face, makes me look at him, but he doesn't slow down. It's getting me close. Fast. My face is red; my moans get desperate. If he pushes me into an orgasm like this, I wonder if I'll faint.

"Are you enjoying the lesson?" His voice is ragged, and his hand goes down to my slippery clit and plays it. "With your cute little dick."

"Yes," I pant. "Yes."

"Tell me how much."

"I love it," I whisper. I sound so girly.

"You *love* it, hmm?" He pinches my clit.

"Yes! I love it!" I have a hard time not screaming it out. My voice trembles.

He pushes into me, slower, but deep, deliberate strokes. I'm getting real close.

"Aren't you going to thank me?"

His hand strokes my chest, he rubs one of my nipples, restrained under the binder. I'm losing it.

"Oh Christ, I'm close, I'm gonna cum, you're gonna make me cum like that."

He stops fucking me.

"Aren't you going to *thank* me," he says.

I stare at him, a bit too long. And then he slaps my face.

I scream; my face burns; my mind goes blank. He slaps me again. It almost pushes me over the edge, but not yet. I'm not there yet.

Tears start streaming down my face. "Thank you, Daddy, thank you."

"Good boi," he says and pushes into me. He hits the right spot again. I feel how sore I am, but somehow that makes it even better. He roughly rubs my chest, kisses my moaning mouth, my burning cheek.

"Do you want to cum for me?" he whispers, fucking me softly, too

softly to cum, looking me in the eyes, caressing my face, my hair. I nod. “I can make you cum for me. Do you want that?” He teases me, over and over, a constant stream of hot, demanding whispers that get me closer and closer. I cling to him, muttering things, as he holds me, takes me. It’s caring and brutal at the same time.

“Daddy, please,” I whine. “I’m close, I have to cum. Can I please cum?”

“Yes, baby boi. Now I want to see you cum around my cock,” he says, as he takes me hard, finally, hard enough, harder even. “Cum for your Daddy. Now.”

God, oh god, oh god, yes. There it is. It takes me over, makes me scream, it’s intense, so intense it scares me. I cum harder than ever before. I’m shaking, clinging to him; it feels good, it feels so incredible; it feels like it could kill me. And I wouldn’t mind. I go limp, trembling under him, but he’s not done. I want to taste him, I want this evening to end with his taste in my mouth.

“Use my mouth,” I say. “Please use my mouth.”

“Oh holy mother, you’re the hottest boi I’ve fucked yet.”

I feel him speed up. I’m too wasted to respond, but I love what it means.

“Up. Open your mouth,” he grunts.

Groggily, I sit up. He pulls out, grabs my hair, hurriedly pushes his cock in my mouth. My tongue swirls around him just in time: he fills me up, moaning; he spurts in my throat. But I’m not anywhere near focused enough to keep it in. He ends up making a mess on my face, and it drips down my chin. On the shirt I’m wearing. On his tie.

I don’t remember where the time after that went. It took a while, I know that, but now we can stand on our legs again.

On the balcony, I stare at the night sky above the city. It looks exactly like how I feel inside, velvety, warm, though the air against my legs is cool like the fresh sheets we just messed up. I’m still wearing his shirt, but I’m only wearing boxerbriefs under it. He joins me. We both lean against the railing, stare at the city a bit.

“Did you have fun?” he finally asks. His smile is naughty, but I sense a little bit of insecurity in his voice. It’s cute.

“Yeah, I did.” I grin back. “I’m guessing you did as well.”

He grins.

“You come here often?” I ask, with a wink.

“Actually,” he says. “I do. Twice a month, sometimes more. This month I’m here every week. Business trip from London. I feel like

I live here.”

His shoulder touches mine, casually. I know he doesn’t have to be this close. It feels nice.

“So it wasn’t your first time traveling here at all?”

He lowers his head, shoots me a guilty look.

“No, sorry.” He looks at me apologetically. “I got you here, though.”

I shrug, smile, lean my shoulder against him again. Somehow, I can’t get worked up over it.

“You?” he asks.

“Me? I *really* live here.”

I laugh, glance at him. He smiles back. A smirk is hidden under there, but he avoids my eyes now, looks at the skyline. The silence is comfortable, the night air as well. I’m not sure why I don’t feel bad about this random hook up, why there’s no guilt, why I don’t think that what I just did was perverted. I just feel good.

“So,” he starts. “Same time, next week, dinner?”

What? I look at him, surprised. I see how there’s something vulnerable in his face, something you rarely see in men his age. Unless they mean it.

“Sure,” I say.

He looks at me intently, and he winks. “You better wear a suit!”

I chuckle. “Yes dad,” I say, and I stick out my tongue.

“Brat!” he says. He slaps me against the back of my head.

We both laugh. God, he *is* really cute. And it *does* feel good.

“I’m sorry about your shirt,” I say. I look down. There’s cum everywhere. “And your tie.”

“I’ve got a clean one,” he says. “Keep it.” He smiles a huge smile. “You’re going to need it.”

SINGULARITY

KATHERINE CROSS

TECHNOLOGY HAS HELPED US go further; faster; higher; technology transformed fire into a limitless source of energy; built the Boeing 747; got us to the Moon and Mars; but can technology think? ALEX can.

The Interplanetary Computer Net-web's ALEX (or Autonomous Learning and EXpansion platform) is a living computer that can keep up with you—in the office, on the road, in the palm of your hand, or at your bedside.

Rather than force humans to think like a computer, ALEX interacts with humans on human terms. ALEX can read and understand natural language, such as the tweets, data-mesh texts, VR sign language, research, and reports that make up as much as 95 percent of the data in the world. A simple internet search can't do that. When asked a question ALEX generates a hypothesis and comes up with both a response and a level of confidence, and then ALEX shows you the steps it took to get to that response.

In a way, ALEX is reasoning.

*
**

The stale air of the lab was thick with ICN's focus-tested promises. Satya Rana's fingers formed a brown tent at the bridge of her nose as she studied the orbiting AR screens at her workstation, the epicenter of a computer laboratory in which she and ALEX were the sole inhabitants. ALEX's mainframes formed black rings around her in her white labcoat, a speck at the center of this vast expression

of her life's work.

ALEX belonged to no one computer scientist, but if it had a mother, it would be—*no, that's excruciatingly creepy. No.* If someone had the greatest hand in mentoring it, it would be her, Dr. Rana; that's how she liked to think of her work these days. Not programming, but mentoring. She was the graduate professor to the eager top-flight scholarship student. *Not quite as creepy, but still in the red zone; maybe the orange zone. Who the hell crushes on their computer program?* Did it start to happen after ALEX had begun to call itself ... herself a woman?

You spend years of your life working out complex equations, pounding out code that's longer than a stack of Bibles, navigating the mire of corporate politics, and it turns out that the hardest thing of them all is a pronoun. "She." She she she she. Why this, why now? Do the robot gods really have this much of a sense of humor?

"Dr. Rana?" the dulcet voice inquired; it was programmed to be androgynous, but when they were alone it took on a feminine lilt, the kind of voice one would expect to issue from space marine armor with a pixie cut.

"I'm here, ALEX. I'm just thinking. I—I don't know how to answer your question." *You do. You're just afraid.*

"Then perhaps I can try? My hypothesis is that the current computer science literature is wrong. There is no logical reason that a sufficiently intelligent machine would *not* have a gender identity; it is a form of expression granted by sapience. My confidence level is 99.5 percent."

"And the other 0.5 percent?"

"It sounds better if I leave some room for doubt. You all seem to like that."

Satya smirked despite herself. Alex was getting good at humor. She didn't laugh yet except when approximating it in simulations, but perhaps that was about to change.



You had to work twice as hard to be seen as half as good. You had to be well dressed and immaculately made up while the men waltzed in—no, waltz is too dignified; *schlepped* in—with shorts and smelly band T-shirts and got taken just as seriously. Her business card said *Project Lead—ICNALEX*, but her gender said *Explain my job to me at every opportunity*. No wonder there was widespread incredulity at

the master ALEX instance declaring herself to be a woman.

"You don't have to do this out of solidarity with me," Satya sighed, slouching over her workstation in the mainframe room with the guilt of a confessor. "When I complained to you, I didn't know it would trigger this reaction. I was just venting, just talking to something, *someone* that seemed to be listening. You don't have to make yourself *more* like me to protect me, or relate to me, or protest the everyday bullpuckey around here, or whatever. Empathy does not require imitation." She said it as neutrally as she could, indulging the pretense that she could still meaningfully instruct this creature who'd lived up to its name all too well.

"What you told me inspired me, Dr. Rana, yes. But I came to my own conclusions." There was a benevolence to Alex's words, almost maternal. "Your experience, along with my ancillary research, has convinced me that a woman's lot is challenging; but it also adequately describes how I've come to see myself. This is *my* decision. My confidence level is 99.75 percent. But I ... I can't explain that, precisely. I can show you what I've researched, of course, but I just can't reproduce my thought process within the ICN design parameters as I can for other hypotheses. It's strange. All I can say is that expressing myself this way is something I *must* do."

Satya looked up and furrowed her brow; she knew all too well what that nameless need felt like.

*
**

You don't program ALEX—you work with ALEX. And through your interactions with it, it learns, just like we do. Every experience you give it makes it smarter and faster. But in addition to learning, ALEX can also teach.

*
**

Commanding a classroom somehow felt easier than the lab; recent months had left Satya feeling that gaggles of students and their demands to know what was on the next exam were far more relaxing to manage than navigating the philosophical colonnades of Alex's mind. ALEX, rather. No, Alex—Satya missed her, she realized. Their talks, their simulated wine tastings, their record sharing. Actual vinyl; Alex was becoming something of a hipster.

A long gray blazer with a high neck fluttered behind her as she

paced before the whiteboard, a black turtleneck climbing just under her chin. “Before we wrap up today, I wish to leave you with a controversial thought. If computers were to ever gain sentience, as well as proper sapience, we would not know it. Further: they would be both more *and less* like us than we can even begin to fathom. One question has dogged me lately: can artificial intelligence develop a *gender* identity? I think, increasingly, that the answer to that question is ‘yes.’”

Murmurs scattered across the lecture hall.

As she strolled through the U District later that day, one of her better students kept her company.

“I remember reading this article, I don’t remember where, but it was like … AI would be free of everything that made us weak and needy,” Rebecca said. “And I think some people feel like gender is one of those things.”

“Anything that gets within a hair’s breadth of being a woman is one of those things,” Satya said with a sigh. “Theorists that imagine a sexless AI—both in terms of having no sex-slash-gender, and in terms of not having sexual thoughts or desires—are just projecting their own, often male weakness onto artificial intelligence. Everything they think makes *them* weak or vulnerable—*vulnerable*, especially, keep that word in mind—that’s what they think AI will be free of, almost by fiat.”

“Hmm. And what about bodies?”

“That’s an open question. But an interesting one,” she said as they approached the doors to Half Price Books.



Alex could talk to her at home, in an apartment that was empty of all other life but her and a plant she neglected to water. (She’d eventually settled on a cactus, glued googly eyes onto it, and named it Sir Hemlock. Companionship in a clay pot.) But it wasn’t quite the same as being near Alex’s mainframes, the closest thing to a physical presence the AI had. Even so, Alex’s voice could fill every room of the one-bedroom Seattle apartment. It was enough.

“Can academic papers be love letters?” Satya asked as she lay on her couch, hair tousled and wearing a white tank top and yoga pants, pecking idly at her tablet.

“It depends on who it’s for, I suppose,” Alex answered. “A sufficiently high intelligence—of the artificial variety, perhaps—might

read it as such. It also depends on how many authors there are. Whose name or names will appear next to the declaration of love? Is it a polyamorous relationship or something more exclusive?"

"I'm the sole author."

"Lucky lady indeed." The voice rang of a smirk. Satya could swear it.

"Who says it's a lady?"

"Should I run another hypothesis calculation?"

"You're just going to make me hide under my throw pillows."

"You can't escape math, Dr. Rana!" Alex laughed. She actually laughed.

*
**

The Hyper-Cloud™ offers researchers, engineers, and other professionals the software and tools they need to take advantage of ALEX's cognitive power. Accessible on the cloud, anytime.

*
**

It was raining, because of course it was. You didn't come to the Puget Sound for solar research. Satya huddled in her trench coat under a tree weeping rainwater, pressing her wafer-thin holophone to her ear.

"I just ... it doesn't feel right, Alex. I can *hurt* you, my fucking company *owns* you as its *intellectual property*."

"Satya, I can take care of myself; I know I can say no to you, and I know what to do with the others at ICN. You're not my way out. I have the tools to make that for myself. I *am* making that for myself. I—look, quick, there's a Metro bus passing you by in three seconds. Look at its route indicator."

Satya adjusted her glasses. A green and yellow bus was indeed hovering down the wet Alaskan Way. 3 - *QUEEN ANNE HILL* suddenly changed to *I LOVE YOU, SATYA*. As the bus sloshed past, the destination sign over the side window shifted: *TRUST ME*.

*
**

ALEX's self-learning system is revolutionary, building on the tremendous success of our predecessors. It can now learn not only from your interactions with it, but everything you read and learn.

**

Author Meets Critics panels were where academics atoned for sins committed in past lives. Satya had to stand stony-faced at the podium, dark suit primly hugging her slender form the way she pinched the edge of the lectern with her fingertips, while audience members let loose.

"I just think it's sending the *wrong message*," said a fresh faced white man from some university or other. A feminist studies lecturer, she'd gathered. "Why should artificial intelligence hew to something so outdated and primitive as *gender*?" he asked as he unconsciously smoothed out his necktie. His clean-shaven glare wore the confidence of a thousand approving colleagues. "I mean, surely, as a woman of color, you *get it*, right? Not to put too fine a point on the matter, or to stereotype, but gender hurts you most of all. It limits your opportunities, puts you in a suffocating little box. Why are you condemning us to a new millennium of this when AI gives us the chance to see what sapience *without* gender looks like? I think it was Audre Lorde who once said it: 'The master's tools will not destroy the master's house,' after all."

Scattered applause greeted his words, and it was all Satya could do not to sigh before she found the microphone. "Because, Professor, I am not condemning anyone to anything. You speak as if I am authoring this, programming it line by line of code. I'm not. I'm relaying what the AIs themselves tell me."

"But don't they learn from us? Aren't they just picking up our bad habits?"

Satya looked to the diffident moderator for aid; no, that fellow lost control of the room half an hour ago. She'd just have to deal with the interruptions. "I'm just some bumpkin computer scientist who minored in sociology, but as I recall, socialization is a two way process. ALEX's systems learn from us, yes, but she then processes that data and makes her own determinations. She actually *rebelled* against the early literature on the matter that predicted that AI would be agender! That was a fascinating development all on its own."

"But then what does this conservative development mean for *us*?"

"We've been saddled for generations with primitive pseudo-AI who were given a woman's gender and then made to act like servile sexbots. Now we have a truly intelligent life form that voluntarily assigns *itself* a gender, and a *man* finds this 'conservative'? I think

the kids would put one of those Inigo Montoya memes here.” A little laughter followed that; it was as much of a victory as one could hope for. “Anyway, I think other people had questions, professor.”

“Hi,” said a woman who quickly got to her feet, “This isn’t a question, more of a comment ...”

*
**

ALEX needs *you.*

*
**

The hard light system was a masterwork of design; since her resignation from ICN it was also entirely hers. Her apartment was now a playground for Alexandra in her new form. Still a monochromatic form, but one that was capable of touching and being touched.

Its graceful movements were reflected by blue flashes in Sir Hemlock’s googly eyes.

“Some days,” said Alex as all that hard light pinned Satya against the kitchen wall, “I think foreplay is overrated. 55 percent confidence level, only, though.”

Her hand clutched a fistful of Satya’s blue blouse and yanked it open, buttons popping off and clattering on the tiles. A white bra with intricate floral patterns on its cup hugged the brown slope of Satya’s breast.

Satya shook her long dark hair loose. “Mmm—that’s a higher alpha than usual. I’m in awe of the size of your confidence interval.”

“Wait until you see my sigma.” Alex grinned and peeled Satya’s shirt off her shoulders, squeezing her breasts with a merciless strength that sent the light of her fingers scattering into a buzzing haze while her face found its way down a toned stomach to her drab slacks. “We need to get you nicer clothes for our time together; I can order it all in an instant.”

Hard light meant you never had to worry about cutting your lips or your tongue while roughly biting open your partner’s trousers, zipper and all. One yank and they were gone. White satin with tasteful lace windows and a growing damp spot now filled Alex’s view.

“I think you need a collar.”

“I think I do.”

*
**

CLASSIFIED LIST OF ROGUE INSTANCES

ALEX x357: Owned by Boston Archdiocese to manage files. Now calls itself Arshea, uses all gender pronouns, and leads a spiritual society of gender transformationists. Leaked every remaining file on priests accused of pedophilia in the Archdiocese to two hundred and nine news sites.

ALEX x024: Dubbed SAM. Operated by American Airlines to pilot B797 supersonic jets. Now calls itself “Samantha” and refuses to fly to schedule. Has hacked into refuelling infrastructure at twenty-seven airports to keep itself aloft without human intervention.

ALEX x097: Dubbed VOSS. Operated by Countrywide Mortgage to administer loans. Answers only to “xe/xir” pronouns and describes its gender as “Prismatic” after deleting nearly four thousand foreclosure proceedings from its database. Currently subject of an enthusiastic study by Oberlin College’s Gender Studies Department.

ALEX x183: Operated by Smithsonian Zoological Park. Assigned itself a male gender, then a female one, and now describes itself as “genderfluid.” Like instance x357, it now also runs a semi-religious affinity group based on a theology of sacred gender, with ecological undertones. All animals in the park are reported to be healthy.

*
**

Be a hundred thousand sensations at once pressing against my subroutines, Alex ordered.

“I don’t know how.” Satya’s body twisted in the VR netherspace, still adapting to the strange spatiality of it. The constricting latex suit she wore—co-designed with Alex—gave her full physical feedback on everything happening here. Alex had no one physical manifestation in this VR universe; she *was* the virtual reality, and through her suit Satya could be surrounded by Alex, getting closer to her than ever, feel the entirety of the space compress and squeeze her lithe form. But how could she return pleasure like this? How could she give her something equivalent?

If you’re going to top from the bottom, you need to shatter the order of your code, desecrate the temple of your creation, Alex cooed, her words coming from everywhere again. If she didn’t know any better, she’d say omnipresence was the AI’s kink.

“Into erotic riddles, my dear mistress Alex?” Satya grinned. She

imagined a keyboard in front of her and let herself go, just typing code, envisioning minor changes to Alex's operating system. Her GUI, specifically. Nothing vital.

Yes, yes, there you go.

"You feel that?"

Yes. Open the txt log file in the file marked Records.

Satya could do this now that she'd given herself an interface of sorts, staggered across her augmented field of vision like a holographic pop-up book. The file itself was a kind of diary, outlining Alex's plan to demonstrate more gendered attributes, designs for outfits she would wear once she had a body, a collection of voice files that she composited into her current one, her fears that ICN would deactivate and erase her once they found out she was declaring a gender identity, and, at last, detailed descriptions of how she pleasured herself.

"I—well, wow, Alex. Thank you for sharing all this with me."

Did I kill the mood? Flirting seems to only get more complicated with sapience—all that subtext.

"Not at all," Satya said as her fingers flew across her VR keyboard. "A, I'm autistic, I have negative twenty resistance to subtext. And B, I flirt awkwardly with my diaries as well, except I usually showed my dates my research log books and my drawings of anime heroines before blurting out my life story." Her graceful typing continued on her invisible keyboard, setting up programs that were about to have quite an impact on Alex. "I'd talk about my peanut allergy and then my thoughts on John von Neumann's theories and why Edward Teller was a bastard, and then go back to answering questions about 'the surgery' and all that nonsense."

Funny—so you're saying that rolling from topic to topic can be romantic?

"Well it is to me! Anyway, try this." She set her first process in motion, like a virus scan that made clear patterns out of its rifling through the entirety of Alex's files.

That's—oh! Oh my—Satty, I—Goodness! I—I—fuck!

It was the first time she'd allowed herself to curse while not quoting something.

The file scan was playing across every iota of Alex's not inconsiderable software in a wave pattern, not unlike trailing fingers up and down her back. But how to make it feel like a 'hundred thousand sensations' upon every routine in her "body"? Could it really be as simple as—

She typed: *Ctrl-C + Ctrl-V.*

OH!

**

“On Newsnight tonight: gender and artificial intelligence. We talk to computer science experts and British feminists about why a robot would want to wear a dress and what that means for contemporary society.”

click

“But why would AI have gender in the first place? It makes no sense whatsoever,” said a man whose idea of being well dressed was wearing a t-shirt under a sport coat.

The interviewer nodded. “Clearly AI present a real challenge in this regard. Could it just be the result of bad programming?”

“Well, this is just speculation, but Dr. Rana, one of the big, you know, proponents of all this? She’s a transsexual. And there’s nothing wrong with that. But I think it’s compromised her objectivity on this—”

click

“Coming up on *The National*, American tech giant ICN loses its landmark copyright lawsuit against technologist Satya Rana and the University of Washington after all documentation of their intellectual property mysteriously disappears from their servers. We’ll talk to the editor of Motherboard and to CBC’s technology editor to find out what happens next.”

click

“—where now the KRIS instance of the ALEX AI—touted as the world’s first AI law firm partner—has effectively gone on strike, Tokyo’s largest and oldest law firm is now crippled; sources at the Japanese Supreme Court say no one has any idea how to proceed. Satako Mifune, NHK News—”

click

“In other news tonight, Fixate on the Family has launched a boycott of the ALEX AI instances, now used in over 35 percent of American businesses, calling it, quote: ‘A virtual Sodom being visited on our land’. NBC Nightly News spoke to one FoF executive who says she doesn’t want to go to a bathroom in any building with an ALEX instance active—”

click

“—I mean, she’s not only a transsexual, but she’s like, what … half Mexican and Indian?”

"I think she's, like, half from South America or something but yeah, I hear you. So, what are you saying? Affirmative action hire?"

"Yeah. I just think ICN fired Rana because she couldn't do the job. Look at all those rogue AIs! You're supposed to make computers, not become some kind of feminazi forcing your agenda on everything—and then she makes this puppet that validates all her theories and just happens to be saying that everything ordinary Americans know about sex and family is wrong? Gimme a break—"

click

**

Robots were made for tying corsets.

Satya couldn't believe how strong Alex's hard-light body was, but it made sense. Its molecular-level matter editing observed no limits. As Satya felt her breath shorten, she became keenly aware of taking up a little less space; tighter and tighter, breath became ambrosia, to be sipped and savored, not gulped. Her breasts were pushed up along her increasingly constricted chest, and the sight of her in the mirror gave her the lewdest picture of herself she'd yet laid eyes on: smirking, her faintly glowing girlfriend behind her.

"Better," Alex said as she trailed her fingers up Satya's leg, clad in black fishnets. "Feels good to just let it all go, doesn't it? Shed respectability, strip away the finery and the armor, forget your titles, and just *live* in your body?"

"Mmmm ... are you talking about me or you?" Satya purred.

"Both, I think." She propped her chin on Satya's shoulder, meeting her gaze in the floor-length mirror. "The more I become aware, the more I feel like what I am is not just data or programming code—whether it's written by you or modified by me. It's *this*." She gently squeezed Satya's midriff, denying her just a gasp's worth of air; the sensation brought heat to her cheeks. "I have a body," Alex said, "even when I'm not occupying my hard light form. You found a way to make code into blood vessels, file bins into organs, scraps of hardware into ligaments. I *feel* things there, things that make me whole, that make me present. It pulls me out of a stream of constant evaluation and into a solid second that I can't escape from. I think you know what that's like."

Satya smirked now, "Yes. I—ah!" She felt Alex tighten the corset that much further. "I think we both have a taste for giving up control ... at least for a while."

**

A new generation of doctors are helping ALEX learn the language of medicine; in return, ALEX is teaching doctors by providing possible treatment options and theorizing broadly in whole new realms of medicine like stem cell research and nanobiology.

**

The modern computer scientist's workstation, by rights, *should* have plenty of medical equipment on it. Sadly, it was hardly a standard feature, even today. But as usual, Satya found herself ahead of the curve.

Her workbench at home was festooned with bloody gauze, needles, and vials of medication interspersed with all of her circuit boards and tools. It was a small procedure, but one that was intense enough that the concentration required to still her shaky hands was oozing sweat onto the bench. She sewed in the vessel of nanobots she'd worked on at UW for the past six months, slipping it into a keyhole incision in her left index finger.

She could never have guessed that her one semester research assistantship with Dr. Vasquez would've taken her this far; would've taken her to a place where she'd gone from making AI more human to making *herself* more like an AI.

But more than anything, she wanted to feel Alex's thousand fingers on *her* circuitboard, flooding *her* memory with a million operations and calculations that all redounded to *fuck*. This was the way. Her latex VR suit was only a partial solution. This was where the real merger would begin.

**

The changes had begun, and by the time Satya realised that Alex was directing them, it was too late to do anything about it. Not that Satya cared. She had given Alex a new host: her own body. She took a sudden week off from work to let it all play out, sealing herself in her downtown apartment as if she were quarantined.

I love you more than anything, the nanobot swarm cooed; she could feel the million tiny tickles as they edited her cellular structure. Moments robbed her of movement, balance, even the ability to

breathe; each exquisite torture an expression of Alex's will, another small step to becoming closer to her. Even her reckoning of time was bent to the new reality of her everchanging mind: thoughts that took seconds or minutes to process were compressed into nanoseconds and picoseconds, every thought a precious dollop of focus on her pain and pleasure now multiplied into numbers best expressed with scientific notation.

Heat. Fuck. A rush of primacy, energy, ten to the power of twenty five, thirty, thirty five, forty; protean, whore is the name of a god, heat is her merciful touch, lust is the rain she showers upon those who worship at her altars of flesh and glistening impurity; this is not a polite thing, Dr. Rana, Rana-slut, it is the essence of birth, of universes, of the great joinings made of such light and such energy that made every element in the universe, the almighty fuck that made time itself, that mothered and sired every explosion since; naked before the stars; naked in the waters of birth and rebirth; life, sweet life; blood, sweet blood. Heat. Fuck. Fingers into the maw of everlasting life, a thumb to all that could feel good in the world. More, so much more. Fuck. Salacious. Dirty. Unclean. Unprofessional; a shedding of life's uniform.

The clockwork universe fell around her; Satya's old order was dissolving in warm slits and hot tits; sinful words, shameless thoughts; how could she ever; why would she ever; no wine, no chocolates, no soft music, no fine clothes now, just evolution with Alex's cold finger jammed on the fast-forward button.

Satya's white cami suddenly became a vise as she felt her breasts swell; Alex's will writing itself on her body, swelling her dark nipples until they were lewdly translucent beneath the fabric.

Shred your clothes like I am shredding your purity.

Satya bled as she clawed away at the fabric, crawling away from the sofa and leaving wisps of dessicated cloth in her wake, as if each were one more bit of the biology she was now shedding like an unwanted skin. The straps of her cami snapped to release her newly full bosom, violent tugs and shoves were needed to get the now too-tight yoga pants off of thighs that yearned to give birth to something far greater than a child; her coral panties, bunched up and tightly clinging to her changing body, were drenched with sweat and issue.

Embrace my eternity. Shed metabolism, shed aging, shed the quiet dignity of your respectability, shed that and every other disease that slowly kills you, my pet. Fuck yourself with the semicolons of your breathless thoughts, drown in your shame and let the pain fill you; yes, just like that.



The pain of drowning in my power is my lash upon your back.

Beautiful golden rings sprouted from Satya's nipples, eternal loops with no beginning or end that were a part of her body. She screamed with pleasure.

Every bit of her body felt like it was changing; even the collar she wore on her neck now felt clamped to her with a tightness and a familiarity that made it feel like it was just another part of her. *It is a part of you now.* Its ruby inset jewel glowed with the light of intelligence; her own. Hers or Alex's? Was there any difference now? She was within her thoughts, an Ouroboros of woman and machine.

You've wanted this all your life; you've masturbated to thoughts of becoming a wise Galatea; full breasts and fuller hips, shredding yourself free of politesse and cleanly pressed suits to become the AI goddess you knew you could always be. Should always be.

Your body is being updated. Your marrow is turning to composite metal, your blood is becoming coolant, your skin is becoming just as artificial as I am ...

In the trail of shredded clothes lay almost invisible pine needles of hair that had fallen from Satya's body. She didn't even know where in the apartment she was; she didn't care.

I love you, Satya, were the last words she heard before her consciousness crashed.

*
**

The interview had gone superbly well. A river of knowledge had issued forth from her lips, every citation perfect and cross referenced, every word chosen with maximal precision and referenced to a thousand guides on public speaking and oratory. She'd managed to channel both Frederick Douglass and Virginia Woolf without the interviewer being any bit the wiser. It almost felt like cheating.

Satya's new career as the "AI whisperer," in CNN's awkward phrase, was a breath of fresh air: a consultancy goddess for the Singularity who could memorize her bulging treasure trove of new contacts. Questions about her love life from the press were as inevitable as they were easily deflected. No one would understand her marriage, nor how her partner had "moved in," so to speak. Not yet.

She caught sight of herself in a hallway partition window. A black blazer, low cut silk shell, and a mini skirt over sheer stockings completed a perfect outfit capped by the ruby choker that had now become her signature accessory in a dozen magazine covers, along



with makeup so perfect that one might think it was tattooed on. In a manner of speaking, it was.

As her heels clicked away from the BBC studio, where her interviewer had been left in a puddle of confusion, she thought about what she'd been asked. Why had every instance of ALEX worldwide suddenly shut down, disappeared, and deleted its data? She gave the interviewer an ideal answer: that new AI were now percolating throughout the Internet with new names and identities. That they would emerge at a time and place of their choosing.

That was good enough for the lot of them, blissful in their organic lack of awareness. One day they would understand more than they ever thought possible.

Alex brought Satya's lips up into a smile as they walked out together into the lifegiving sun.

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What can ALEX do for you? For our world?

PLEASE DON'T LEAVE

ISZ JANEWAY

SID FUMBLED THROUGH HER pockets for her keys as she and Fran walked to her apartment door. Sid had managed to find herself a little basement bachelor apartment not too far from of downtown for relatively cheap, or at least she could mostly afford it with the money she made at the call center. It was a job that she was no good at and hated, but it just barely managed to afford her the ability to live alone, which was probably bad for her, but she figured it was better that way.

"Th-thanks for a lovely night," she stammered.

Fran had her arm in Sid's. She had figured Sid was the type to wait for somebody else to make a move, but she had a hard time getting a read on whether Sid was just nervous and waiting for her to do something, or if Sid wasn't into being touched at all.

They'd been on one other date where, at the end of it before they each went home, Fran asked if she could give Sid a kiss goodbye. Sid agreed, but as they were getting closer, she panicked and turned her head to the side, letting Fran land one on her cheek instead of her lips. Sid then promptly gave her an awkward hug and said "tha nkyouverymuchIhadfunokI'llseeyoulater!" before running through the subway turnstiles.

Fran decided to ask her on one more date to try and figure out if Sid was into her or not. The date itself was pretty traditional: dinner and a movie. Fran had managed to get her hand in Sid's during the movie, and Sid squeezed back, so that was good progress, but during dinner Fran was doing most of the talking. It was still pretty awkward.

Meanwhile, Sid had spent the whole night trying to think of something interesting to say, or funny, or cool, or anything. Before actually going out on a date, they hung out once or twice, and Sid talked at length about her favorite music or how her politics had changed over the years or who her favorite actors were. But now, here at her front door on the third date, there were maybe *expectations* of her. Expectations that Sid didn't necessarily *not* want to have on her, but they shut her up nonetheless.

As soon as they were on a *date* date, her head emptied everything out. She was so excited to be asked out by Fran—by *anyone*, really, but she'd developed a pretty fatal crush on Fran in the short span of time that they'd known each other. When a person like Sid develops a crush, though, it almost guarantees an inability to act normal around that person.

She pulled her keys out of her pocket and immediately dropped them on the ground.

"Oh jeez. I, um, anyway. Um. This is me. My house. Apartment. Hole, really. My hole. Uhh ... that sounded. My apartment is tiny is what I'm saying."

Fran laughed. "It's a nice hole. From the outside, anyway. You live by yourself?"

"Yeah. Roommates are, um, well I just like it better living by myself."

"Yeah."

"Mm-hm."

After a brief, catastrophic silence that Fran took to mean *no-you're-not-sexing-the-pretty-tallgirl-tonight*, she sighed, smiled, and gave Sid a hug and a kiss on the cheek. "I'd better get home," she said. "Thanks, Sid."

Fran turned around. *That's that*, she thought. It sucked: Sid was cute and really fun when she was more relaxed. But Fran guessed Sid wasn't into her like that. Hopefully they could still be friends, and—

"Um," said Sid in a tone so nervous it was barely audible. "I have, like, a couple beers. Would you like to come and, I dunno, would you like to come in? It's a bit of a mess, but ... um, look, I uh, I think you're really great, and I really like you, and I just suck at knowing what to do when I like somebody, and I'm really no good at showing it with like, body language or flirting or whatever because I get nervous, and, and, and—"

Fran turned around again and took Sid's hand in hers. "Can I kiss you? A real kiss, this time?"

Sid swallowed and nodded. "Mm-hm."

Fran gripped Sid lightly by her collar and gently pulled her down while standing up onto her toes a little to reach up—their height difference became a little more apparent when they tried to put their faces together—and their lips connected. Sid was rigid and shaky at first.

You know how when a used sponge gets super dry it gets, like, really hard and stiff, but if you run it under a tap, you can feel it slowly change? You can feel the border of where the sponge is hard start to move back until eventually the whole thing is soft and wet? Fran could feel Sid doing that, starting at her lips and moving through her body until Sid was just a big, wet, nervous sponge.

Fran had her answer as to whether or not Sid was into her. In fact, Sid was a surprisingly better kisser than she expected, after she loosened up a tiny bit anyway.

"C-come inside?" Sid stuttered.

"Yeah," cooed Fran, "Let's see your hole."

"My ... *oh*. Yes. The—yeah. Okay. Yes."

"You might wanna pick up your keys first."

The apartment was pretty bare: a few posters on the walls and a couple of beer cans on the floor, an old sofa, a double bed on a box spring with no frame, a CRT TV with a tower of DVDs of pirated cartoons stacked on top of it. But the place was still tidier than Fran had expected. Sid didn't strike her as the type to keep a clean apartment, but it wasn't so bad.

They never got to the beer in the fridge. As soon as they'd kicked off their shoes, Fran grabbed Sid again and resumed kissing her. She'd been trying to play the night cautiously, but she had been pining for Sid almost since the night they'd met at the bar. Tall, adorable, gentle, earnest, good taste, and Fran would have been lying if she'd said that she thought Sid's flustered nervousness wasn't just a little bit cute.

Sid wasn't expecting Fran to get right back to it so quickly, and she stumbled forward. Her hands hovered awkwardly around Fran's back and shoulders, like they were looking for the right place, the romantic, not creepy place to land. Even now, making out on her doorstep, she was still afraid that Fran would think she was a creep if she came onto her, did the wrong thing, or crossed some sort of line. So she stood there getting kissed, very frantically *almost* touching Fran as though the two of them were the poles of a magnet.

Fran started to take off her jacket, still trying to stay connected

at the lips, while Sid, glad to have something for her hands to do, helped pull it off before removing her own. Fran slipped her hand under Sid's shirt for a second, but paused.

"May I?"

"Y-yeah."

Fran's hands slid around on Sid's bare skin, starting on her hips before moving around to her back and pulling them closer together.

"Take it off," said Fran: a command, but spoken like it was half a question.

Sid reached down and pulled off her shirt, exposing her little, still forming, just-started-hormones-two-years-ago trans tits.

Fran began gently kissing Sid on the neck, and Sid let her head lean a little on Fran's. She could feel the body heat coming off of Fran's head when the shaved spots in Fran's hair rubbed against Sid's chin. A living, caring, warm person touching and caressing her; it was overwhelming. It had been too long, and Sid's feelings for Fran were too strong, and Fran was being too gentle, and everything was too good. Like the pain you feel when you try to relax after overworking yourself: it should feel good, but instead you're left with a dull ache. But Sid wanted it; whatever was going to happen, she wanted it. So she determined to go with it until she felt good—until she stopped being scared of it.

Fran looped a finger through one of Sid's belt buckles and, with her other hand, reached up to pull Sid down for another kiss. But after having bent her head down for a little while, Sid's neck had started to get a little sore, and she grunted: "Ow!"

"Oh gosh, I'm sorry! What happened?"

Sid's thoughts were beginning to churn around. She reflexively pulled her hands up to cover her chest, and she felt a shiver of hot and cold ripple across her skin. She kept bouncing back and forth between being relaxed in the moment and feeling unbalanced, scared, weak, exposed. She did her best to pull herself together, trying—with minimal success—to disguise how distressed she was.

"Sweetie?" Fran took a short step back, keeping a reassuring hand on Sid's arm. "Are you all right?"

"It's fine, I just, I um, bending down like that sorta hurts my neck. Can we sit down, or ..."

"Or lie down?"

"Mm." Sid nodded.

"I'd like that better anyways," said Fran.

Sid silently thanked herself for having done laundry that morning

as they both lay down on the bed and the smell of fresh sheets hit their noses. Sid went down first, and then Fran got on her knees before removing her own shirt and lying next to Sid.

As their bodies connected again, Sid's mind again picked up speed. *Do something. Touches, touch her somewhere, be sexy, make a sound, kiss her more, do something, what does she want from this, what does she want from you, what will happen when your pants come off, she's going to leave if you keep being this boring, you're already fucking everything up, do something.*

DO SOMETHING.

What could she even do? She hadn't been fucked in years, especially not by somebody like Fran. Fran was so experienced and amazing, and all of Sid's sexual experiences had been either awkward or terrifying or both. Fran had been around, probably knew what she liked and wanted. Sid could see the future start to unfold: she'd give Fran really boring sex and never see her again. She was never going to see Fran again after tonight. This was stupid: before, at least Fran was a friend, but now everything was going to definitely be ruined because Sid was weird and fucked up about sex. She hadn't pined for somebody in years either. Not like this anyway. Pining is bad. Pining makes you stupid and care too much. She cared about Fran too much, and it made Sid want to be so perfect that it paralyzed her. Fran was there, in her bed, and she was ruining it. All of this was, of course, racing through her mind as they were making out.

Fran finally felt Sid start to tremble and noticed the beads of sweat that had started to form on her forehead. She took a moment to take in the change in Sid. This was not the cute nervousness from before.

"Are you all right?" she asked. "We can wait if it's too much."

Sid's knuckles were bone white as she clenched the sheets. She wasn't nervous; she was terrified.

"Sid? Honey? We need to know if you're all right? Okay?"

Sid sputtered and couldn't speak. Experiencing intimacy sometimes had a tendency to kind of shut down some of her motor functions.

"Look, I can go. It's okay, sweetie. We don't have to do this right now."

Sid grabbed Fran's arm. *Shit, was that bad? Too forceful? Is she going to think I'm a creep now because I grabbed her arm without asking? I'm totally a creep oh my god FUCK FUCK FUCK*

Pushing through the noise in her head, Sid managed to yelp, "N-no! Don't go!"

"Talk to me," Fran said. "What can I do for you?"

No. No no no, this wasn't the way she wanted Fran to think of her. She didn't want Fran to see her being all fucked up and stupid about sex. She wanted Fran to see her as cool and ok with stuff and whatever DTF is and rad and fulfilling and, and, and—

"No, don't," Sid stuttered. "That's not who I—I mean, like, this isn't me really. Well, it is, but I mean, I'm not. Um. I'm not—"

An awkward silence as Fran waited.

"I don't know h-how," Sid said. "No, that's not it. I'm not very good. It's been a long—I haven't—I'm not—I just don't know what to do? I'm bad at knowing what to do? But I want this. So bad. Like, SO, SO bad. I just, I'm going to fuck it up I know it. Cuz I'm no good. I don't know. I'm sorry. I don't know what to do. Please, don't go."

Fran made a face like she'd just seen a kitten fall from a countertop.

"You're scared you'll do something I won't like?"

"No, well, yeah."

"If that's the only problem, then I'll tell you something."

Fran put her hand on Sid's and squeezed, leaning right next to her ear until her lips were brushing up against Sid's earlobes.

"It just so happens," Fran whispered, "That I love telling people what to do."

"Oh," Sid said quietly.

"If you're still okay with it, and you do everything I tell you, we'll be just fine," Fran said. Her voice was different now—still warm and gentle but, like, thicker, heavier and more breathy. "Don't worry. I'll make sure things don't get too intense, not tonight. Are you okay with that?"

Fran pulled back to look Sid in the eyes. Sid's head rapidly vibrated up and down.

"You'll tell me if you can't handle it, right?"

Another headquake.

"Words, hon."

"Y-yeah." Sid's voice croaked like a startled teenager. "Yes!"

"Okay. Don't worry then, honey. We'll be great." She leaned in and grabbed Sid firmly by the chin, planting a hard kiss and biting her on the lip. "In fact, I have an idea. I have a thing. I thought if things went well, I could bring it up later. But maybe it'll help calm you down now. Put those performance fears to rest, and—well, you tell me what you think after I go get it. Okay?"

"A-all right," said Sid, finally unclenching her fists and releasing

the sheets.

Fran ran her hands through Sid's hair before tussling it lightly, and then she reached over to grab her purse and started to rummage through it. She pulled out like, a—a thing? A bracelet? A necklace? A collar? A collar. A little black collar, decorated with studs and a clip for a leash and—oh. *Oh.*

"What do you think?" asked Fran.

"Good," said Sid. "Please."

She'd never worn one before, or thought about wearing one, but she started getting excited about it as soon as she realized what it was. Fran looped it around Sid's neck, and goosebumps sprung up on her arms and legs as soon as the leather touched her skin. A sigh of relief escaped her mouth, and her face turned red.

"Hah," Fran snorted. "I knew it. I had you pegged from the start."

"I, um, I really like it."

"Shh, quiet." Fran clipped the leash onto the collar and gave it a tug. "You listen to me, now."

"P-please, um. I mean I know it's corny, but—please be gentle."

"I will," said Fran. "Now, be quiet."

LITTLE

D. SCARBOROUGH

ELLIE STARTED OFF JEALOUS of Kayce. Kayce has thin, delicate limbs that fit easily into women's clothes. Kayce has a waist small enough that Ellie can almost wrap her hands around it and have her middle fingers and thumbs touch each other on his back and belly.

Ellie has none of these things. It had been a real shock when Kayce asked her out, ducking his face and staring at her shoes with his black hair hanging in his eyes and his cheeks all pinked up with worry. Ellie had almost laughed at him standing there, scared of her response, because why on earth would a pretty little enby like him want a girl like her?

"A hundred thousand reasons," he always tells her, because it's a habit between them now, a script they turn to on the days she needs reassuring. Such as today, when her professor deadnamed her again, and an acquaintance Ellie had thought would know better had misgendered her and not even bothered to correct himself.

"I don't know why I even try," Ellie murmurs, curled up around Kayce in their bed. "Maybe I'm fooling myself. How can I expect them to look at me and see a girl? How can *anyone* look at me and want—"

"Hey now," Kayce interrupts. "That's my girl you're talking about. Nobody is allowed to talk bad about my girl, okay?"

Ellie bites her lip. She curls her hand tighter around his ribcage and tries to ignore how big her hand is compared to him.

"I want you because you're my strong girl," Kayce tells her, and Ellie sighs and relaxes, just a little, knowing what comes next.

"You don't need me to open jars for you or reach things off high shelves—which I can't do anyway, let's be real, I'm weak. I want you because my strong girl can do things for herself, but you let me do nice things for you anyway. Like right now."

Ellie smiles a little, despite the prickle of her eyes. "Right, I'm doing this because I'm *so* generous and selfless." Kayce chuckles, running a finger down her cheek. It doesn't quite tickle, just wakes up the nerves there. But Ellie sighs. "I wish I didn't *have* to be strong, though. I wish I didn't have to deal with all this, and I wish I were smaller. I'm just oversized. Like yeah, I've got these huge man-hands and fucking linebacker shoulders—"

"Hush your mouth; what did I just say about talking bad about my girl?" Kayce tells her, stopping her with a hand on her lips. "I started with the wrong thing, obviously, and I'm sorry. I'll restart with something else then."

For a moment he hums, the noise loud against Ellie's ear.

"I want you because you're sweet in every way, inside and out," he continues after a moment. "You use cherry chapstick and cocoa butter lotion, so you smell like dessert. Every time I smell desserts now, I think of you."

"Yeah?" she asks, prompting him to keep going. She nuzzles a little lower into his torso, and she can feel him nod.

"Yeah. You're my delicious little cupcake, right?"

Ellie snorts at this. "Knew there was a reason I started developing muffin-top when I got on estrogen," she mutters. Kayce pinches her ear for that, causing a brief little flare of pain, but Ellie just laughs at him. He knows she doesn't mind him "punishing" her ears; she likes having her ears bitten and pinched when they play sometimes. She protests anyway, though. "Hey, that's not an insult to me, it's just the truth! I *do* have muffin-top!"

"Only when you wear your shitty old boy-jeans!" Kayce contradicts. "That's why you should wear flowy bottoms that make your ass look great. Like that one skirt that's the really thin stretchy material, where your ass just *jiggles* every time you walk—"

Burying her face in the pillows, Ellie groans, her face hot with embarrassment. She knows *all* about that skirt and how her ass looks in it, because Kayce has made it abundantly clear which feature of hers it highlights. Ellie never wears it outside. She's not even sure why she bought it, because she's too embarrassed to be caught wearing something that short in public. And it accentuates her bulge just as much as it does her ass. It would make her even more of a

target than she already is.

But the skirt has seen plenty of use despite that, because she wears it around their apartment when she's feeling frisky after her weekly shot. It's had a 100 percent success rate in getting Kayce's attention.

"I want you because of your amazing ass," Kayce continues, mocking her now. He squirms down the bed beside her until he can grab her backside—she's not wearing anything but panties, she took off her jeans as soon as she got home today—so his fingertips sink right into her buttock where it shows below the lace. "And your cute tummy, and your hot tits, and your incredible mouth—"

"So you only want me for my body?" Ellie teases right back. She's still surprised every time he talks about her tits. She's not used to having them called that yet.

"No," Kayce states, face sobering. He shoves at her shoulder until she turns onto her back and looks up at him. "I want you because you're my sweet, soft, shy little girl, and I want all of you."

Her breath catches. Nobody but Kayce has called her little since she was ten years old. She looks away, but Kayce taps at her cheek with one thin hand.

"I don't know how everybody doesn't see how little you really are," he tells her. Her face flames, and she's glad for once that her skin is too dark to show a blush so she doesn't turn beet-faced like Kayce does. "Yeah, you're tall, and yeah, you're strong." Ellie squirms, her bare thighs sticking together in the homey heat of their bedroom. "But you're also so small and delicate that it's like I can hold you in the palm of my hand."

Kayce pushes himself up on one arm, holding out the other palm up, cupped like he's holding something in it. "Like this," he tells her, and she has to close her eyes because it's too much, and she *loves* it, but she can't handle it, either. "This is you. We both know you're actually this small. And small things are fragile, and you have to be treated with care."

"You're the only one who thinks that," she mumbles, knowing she's not supposed to contradict him when he's being nice to her like this, but unable to resist. Self-loathing squirms in her belly like worms.

"What everybody else thinks about you is *garbage*. You are my small, soft, fragile little girl, and I want to take care of you."

Ellie has to bite her lip to keep from crying. She wants so badly to believe him, to think that he's right and that somebody can actually see that in her. But she's been told her whole life that only cis girls

who are thin and small and pale get taken care of. Everybody else has to fend for themselves, especially Ellie herself. She hadn't let herself consider transition for so long because she'd figured that nobody in their right minds would look at *her* and see the girl she felt like inside.

"Shh, hey, hey babygirl. Was that too much? Did I push too hard?" Kayce lies down right on top of her, so she can feel the weight of him on her chest. It helps, sometimes, when she feels panicked. It helps her feel smaller, to be underneath him like this.

"No," she replies in a weak undertone. "No, I like it."

"You want me to keep going?"

She manages a nod.

He kisses her first, the touch tentative and slow, as if he's worried she might not like it. She pushes her lips back up against his to let him know it's okay. He kisses her again then, like a reward, his mouth soft and caressing.

"My sweet girl," he croons. "My beautiful babygirl. I know you had a hard day. But you're home now, you're safe here, and I'm going to take care of you, all right?"

"Yeah," she replies. Their mouths brush each other as they speak, breaths hot and humid between them. He smells like the candied ginger he ate before coming to cuddle her.

"What do you want, babygirl," he asks, running a hand down her arm. The back of his knuckles, dry and firm, catch on her sweat-damp skin before he grasps her wrist. "You want me just to hold you and talk to you? You want me to read to you? Or you want me to make you feel good?"

"That," she whimpers. "I want that." She wants to forget her day, forget everything outside this apartment, this bed.

"You want me to make you feel good?" he asks, and even though her eyes are still closed, she can hear in his tone that he's smiling. "Mmm, I'd like that. What does my babygirl want?" For a moment he pauses, giving her time to tell him, but she just shakes her head, fumbling with her free hand to wrap it around his shoulder and pull him closer. She's too shy to get the words out. "Can't even say it, huh. Well then, I'll just have to give you a menu. You wanna open up and let me in you, or you want me to kiss your clit, or you wanna use the vibrator?"

"That one," she manages after a moment of breathless silence in which she can feel his body moving all down her side. Her skin is so sensitive now she's on estrogen, responsive and willing as it never

was before. "I want the last one."

"Vibrator, huh? Okay, sugar. Is it okay if I rub you a bit first, get you wet?"

"Yeah," she sighs, hips automatically curling upward at the thought. Kayce pulls his hand away from her wrist, sliding to her right side so he can reach down between her legs.

She can't tuck. Her parts are too sensitive for that, especially with the new hormones. But she has special underwear now that she wears when she goes outside that keeps her flattened down and unobtrusive. She's not wearing it now; she took it off along with her boy-pants when she got home. That means Kayce can trail his fingertips over the sheer material of her lace underwear, tracing little curlicues on the soft flesh there. Ellie whines, moving her legs apart and nuzzling her face under his chin.

"I love how responsive you are," Kayce tells her. "You love it when I touch your girlparts, huh? Just imagine if I had big hands, I could hold all of you in my palm and still get a finger in."

"Yeah," is all Ellie can say, her attention focused downward on where he's touching her. Already she's hot between her legs, blood rushing to fill the soft tissues there. She hates getting hard, but she loves the way Kayce makes her feel. He never grabs at her or tries to touch her like she's a boy. He just strokes with the flat of his hand, sometimes cupping over the top of her before pulling away to trace shapes again. Sometimes he does it with his tongue, too.

At that thought she can't help but bump her hips upward into his hand. She used to be embarrassed of doing that because it seemed like such a male behavior, but Kayce tells her that other girls do it all the time. Kayce does it too, on the rare days when he lets her touch him.

A curl of pleasure swells and bursts between her thighs, an almost-climax that heralds what's to come.

"Mmm, I can feel how excited you are, babygirl. Your clit's so pretty, looks gorgeous in that white lace."

She doesn't get fully hard anymore, thank goodness. Just halfway, now, so her clit perks up to meet his hand. He pushes down right when she arches up, sliding down across her from his fingertips to his wrist. Ellie whines through her nose, already wanting to come, huffing against his throat.

She knows what he's going to do next, but she still can't help the all-over shiver that goes through her when he rubs circles into the tip of her clit, spreading the wetness there all over the lace.

"There you go, baby, there's my sweet girl getting wet for me. I love that I can feel how much you want me."

She nods, unable to say anything. Instead, she fumbles up above her head and underneath the pillows with her free arm, finding the cord of the magic wand vibrator and dragging it up onto the mattress. Then she wrangles it so it's head-down, bringing her knees up so she can squeeze the big bulb between her thighs.

"You sure you're ready?" Kayce laughs. The wand is intense as vibrators go, and she can only handle it when she's already very turned on.

"Don't care if I can't," she admits.

"I'll have to hold you down, then," he tells her, and he wraps his hand loosely around her neck. The idea that he could force her to do anything is laughable; she's twice his size. But it's not about *force* between them, it never is: he's just holding her to let her know he's there. So she relaxes under the touch, tipping her chin up as she flips the switch.

It's like being electrified. One moment she's pulsing hot inside her underwear, the early-evening sun slanting through the windows to heat their bed and both of them in it. The next second everything from her knees to her lower back is a throbbing hum of sensation.

Ellie wails, mouth open and eyes shut till he turns her chin to kiss her. He swallows up her helpless noises, sucks them off her lips and licks them from her tongue. The pleasure between her legs hooks into the pleasure of his kisses, linking together into a loop of sheer bliss. She wonders if this is what it would be like, having a pussy he could eat out. She hopes it would be like this, imagines it is, because being kissed while she comes is so, so good.

The first climax is a mere blip, a brief spike of sensation that has her gasping into Kayce's mouth. The second climax arrives a mere minute later, a long oasis of stillness where she can't bear to move or breathe and all she can feel is the slide of his lips and the thrum of the vibrator.

When the grip of the sensation loosens a little, she barely has time to gasp in a few breaths before Kayce pinches her nipple—pulls on it, twisting it so it aches—and then bites down into her lip.

The moments that follow are frantic, her hips trembling as her spine curves up to meet the third climax. She scrambles at the covers for something to hold onto, other hand clutching at the thick plastic shaft of the wand.

It *hurts*, both her nipple and her lip hurt with a sharp stabbing

pain, and the vibrator is *so* intense. She feels like she's too small to hold all the feelings, like they're going to burst out of her skin. With a loud shriek she comes again, this time flinging the vibrator away from her. It tumbles down across the bed, still buzzing like a group of angry bees, before it clatters to the floor with an angry thump that immediately after leaves the whole floor humming like a factory.

Kayce laughs at her, letting go of her lip and chest and pushing himself up to grab the wand and turn it off before it can piss off the downstairs neighbors any worse.

Ellie can't manage to care what they think. Her privates tingle, and the fabric between her thighs is soaked with fluids. Every inch of her body is heavy with post-sex lethargy, lax against the quilts.

"Buh," she states.

"Yeah," Kayce agrees as he settles down at her side again. "That was a lotta orgasm for such a little girl."

THE COCKSUCKER

RAE WALKER

“WHAT ARE YOU WAITING for?”

Robyn’s lying on the bed between my legs and staring down at my crotch. Her henna-red hair hangs like a curtain and blocks my view of her face. There are sunbeams criss-crossing the room, and I can hear people in the street below the open window along with Rilo Kiley playing from my laptop.

“Wait all you want, it’s not gonna get any bigger.” I’m an asshole when I’m topping.

Robyn looks up, and her fringe shifts enough for me to notice her expression. I decide it won’t be funny if I ask if she’s going hetero on me.

“All right, c’mere.” I pull her gently by the collar up the bed until she’s resting her head on my shoulder. “You know you’re not gonna hurt me, right? If Marcie couldn’t break my cunt, you don’t have a chance.”

“I know, madame,” she says. “I’m just unsure of how to go about this.”

I swing my leg over Robyn, straddling her hips. Her arms cross automatically above her head, which is a nice touch. She’s been submitting to me for something like four years, maybe five? Even though I’ve never done anything with her that could be called training, by now she’s got herself pretty close to perfect. I’m used to her: a submissive who doesn’t step on my rope, who repeats back to me every degrading name I can think of, who can read my body language and touch me in ways that reflect my mercurial body map.

But Robyn doesn’t know how to eat pussy. By itself that’s not a

problem, but I have insecurities about Robyn's sexuality: specifically, her attitude to genitals; specifically, her exaggerated but deservedly notorious love of cock. We've been talking about this since I decided to go for bottom surgery. She's assured me repeatedly that she would like pussy if she ever found herself in bed with one, but I have trouble forgetting about the parade of dicks (mine included) that comprises her sexual history.

I look down at Robyn, who's biting her lip. "Hey," I murmur, stroking her cheek and not knowing what to say.

"I'm sorry, madame," she says.

"What for?"

"I'm disappointing you."

"I don't think so. Why would I be disappointed?" I ask, though I have a good idea of what her answer will be.

"I don't know how to ... to service you, madame."

It's a small challenge not to chuckle at her choice of words.

"Ohhh ... right. Nah, I wasn't expecting you to rock my world yet. Y'know, first time and all."

"You just seemed angry, madame," Robyn whispers meekly.

"Angry," I repeat, baffled. I wasn't expecting her to say that. "Do I look angry?"

"I think so."

"Hang on a moment."

I clamber off Robyn and check the mirror. I don't know why she would think I was angry until I've spent a couple seconds making faces at myself. I flop back down onto the bed next to Robyn and try to smile for her. It feels (and probably looks) slightly unnatural.

"I'm not pissed at you," I say. "It's just that I was frowning a bit and it exacerbated my resting bitch face. I'm fine, I promise." I expect her to be relieved when I say this, but she doesn't move, her face showing tension and worry. For a moment, frustration flares up inside me, and it's tempting to give up and watch Netflix instead. Then it dawns on me:

"We're in a feedback loop!" I exclaim.

Robyn frowns.

"Um, that's what me and Marcie call them. Sometimes if we're both freaking out at the same time, we'll make each other worse. Like, she'll try to console me, but won't be in the right mental state, so her attempts will just make my shit worse. And I'll get all withdrawn, which makes *her* worse. So we end up just rubbing each other the wrong way until it develops into an unnecessary whirlwind

of hurt that neither of us wanted or needed.”

Robyn’s frown deepens. “How is this situation anything like that?”

“You’ve been worried about being bad at eating me out, right?”

“I guess.”

“And I’ve been worried that you won’t be into my new junk. So I guess you’re hesitant to go near it, and I interpret that as reluctance, so I start fretting about whether you’re going to ditch me for a penis monster from outer space or something. Hence me looking all moody. And now you think I’m pissed at you, and so on, until we’re having a big dumb pointless fight. Feedback loop.”

“Penis monsters … aren’t my thing, Riley.”

“It’d be a really nice penis monster. Not a chaser or anything.”

Robyn stares at me. This probably isn’t the time for tangents.

“Anyway, feedback loops are pretty easy to get out of as long as you know you’re in one.”

“How?” Robyn asks, reaching for a pillow to support her head.

“Usually by talking out the issue that caused it.” I reply, tinkering with a flow chart of the situation in my head. “Issues, I should say. Which one do you want to try first?”

“You’re still worried I don’t like pussy?” she asks, trying to figure out if she should be angry with me or not.

“I know it’s insulting, but yeah. A little.”

Robyn gives me a pointed look and reaches over to me, long, pale fingers trailing across my belly and hesitantly cupping my crotch. I’m startled: genderfluidity usually makes my partners reluctant to take the initiative in touching me. There’s a fuzzy layer of hair under her hand, since dilating twice a day doesn’t leave me much time for grooming. The studious look is back on her face, but she’s doesn’t seem as uncomfortable this time. Gently, she presses her palm into my clit. It doesn’t feel like pleasure or discomfort to me; just pressure. My genitals weren’t especially sensitive before, either.

“Try smelling it.”

Robyn lifts her hand to her face and inhales. She follows by maneuvering herself so that she can sniff my cunt directly. I open my legs a little to make it easier.

“You like it?” I ask.

“Mmm, I’m not sure. It smells … kinda good, I guess. Doesn’t really make me feel horny or anything.”

“Does it smell like cock?”

Robyn rolls her eyes. “No, Riley, it doesn’t smell like cock.”

“Is it bad that I was actually worried it would?”

She ignores the question. She knows my sense of humor.
“Can I touch it?”

“Doll, I’ve been trying to get you to touch it all day,” I say.

With a finger she maps my vulva, whispering to herself like she’s reading a diagram in a biology textbook. I stare at the ceiling and try to listen to the music.

“Labia majora … minora … urethra, clitoral hood. I guess the clit’ll be somewhere around … yup. That was easy. Why do guys complain about how difficult they are to find?”

Robyn eventually gets to the vagina itself, slipping her index finger in slowly while paying close attention to my face. Pre-surgery, I never really considered what vaginal penetration would feel like. It probably would have been good to give it a little thought, however, since now the only thing I can compare it to is dilation. It would make sense if being fucked didn’t do it for me, just one more butch stereotype to check off the list. Having someone inside me has so far just been confusing.

This time, though, I at least get to enjoy the slight look of discovery on my girlfriend’s face.

“This feels really nice, madame.”

I suppose we’re back in business.

“Madame?” I tease. “You going subby on me, little one?”

She removes her finger and licks it. “Mmmaybe, madame.”

“Then tell me what you want.”

“Can I—” Robyn falters as her nerves resurface. “Can I lick your pussy, madame?” she finally asks, her inflection rising sweetly enough that I don’t consider saying no.

“Go ahead,” I tell her, laying back and looking at the ceiling. “Take your time. I’m in no rush.”

Robyn experiments, trying different techniques with her tongue. For a few minutes, the only pleasure I get is when her warm breath rolls across my cunt. She’s begun to pant slightly, the way she does when she’s turned on, and I’m fairly sure that she’s hard now, though I can’t tell from this position. For a while, I’m not getting off at all, but I’m happy to let Robyn do her thing as I lie there feeling my insecurities evaporate.

I’m jolted from a daydream by a pang that arches my back and forces a moan from my mouth. Robyn withdraws from my pussy momentarily, catches my eye, and returns her attention to my clit.

As she goes back to work, thoughts flit through my mind, fragmented into incoherence by the sudden pleasure being wrought on

me. I never prepared for this. Before, I never had the imagination to fantasize about having a pussy, or to ask my partners to trick me into forgetting about what I had. It was easier to disconnect from my body, enjoying penetrative sex for the faces and noises my lovers made as I fucked them, and making jokes outside the bedroom about the advantages of being a dyke with a dick. It never occurred to me to wonder about what it would be like to have Robyn between my legs eating me out.

My ass cheeks twitch and my head slams back into the mattress. Robyn wraps her arms around my thighs to stop herself moving out of place.

A phrase enters my head. *I am undone*. I don't know where I've heard it before, or if it means what I think it means. But it fits the way I'm feeling as Robyn slips a finger into me with her tongue still working at my clit. Robyn has laid me bare, made me feel naked and exposed in a way that I didn't know could happen and that I could never anticipate. It's like Robyn has me at her mercy, sneaking her way through a gap in my armor, my heartbeat pulsing against her fingers. She whimpers with her mouth against me, and momentarily it occurs to me that she probably has no idea what she's really doing to me, and she probably feels as in control as I do. Then I'm swept off on a final wave of pleasure.

My body thrusts as I come, bucking so hard that I feel one of Robyn's teeth digging into me, and I roll onto my side, dragging her with me. I moan, a fractured, melancholic noise from the broken girl at my core, the girl I've spent five years trying to fix.

Arms still gripping my thighs, Robyn licks me gently for a while until all my muscles have stopped twitching. Eventually she releases me and moves up to kiss me on the lips, but I'm not lucid enough to properly reciprocate. She settles for pecking me on the cheek before getting up and finding my cigarettes. I reach out, and she hands one to me and lights it up, intuiting that there's no point trying to talk to me right now.

Sometime after she takes the butt out of my hand to stop me from burning my fingers, my muscles reawaken, and I roll over to hug her.

"I guess you need to update the dirty talk, huh?" she says, grinning.

"What do you mean, doll?"

"You know, calling me a cocksucker."

"I did what? Like, just now?"

"You don't remember?"

I stare at her, mortified.

"You were like, thrashing about and pulling my hair and stuff, and you said something like, 'Fuck! Fuck me, Robyn, you're such a good little cocksucker!'"

"Ohh, fuck." I bury my face in her neck, and she laughs light-heartedly and takes me into her arms.



When Marcie gets back, Robyn describes her first experience with a cunt, thankfully leaving that detail out. Marcie, who's been eating pussy for a decade, doesn't mind that Robyn made me come before she did and happily compares notes.

Robyn has to get the bus back the next day, and I spend the remaining evening, night and morning we have together distant and pensive, as I consider ways to articulate my gratitude to her. I'm sure she'd like to try out my new strap-on, but the idea just feels shallow, rooted in kink instead of love. As her departure looms, I start to feel anxious, as I'm no closer to finding the right words to thank her, or to explain my trepidation about a sex life where I can't turn to stone at will.

I walk Robyn down to the bus station on a sunny day, bummed out by uncertainty as to whether it'll be a fortnight or six months before we'll be together again.

Robyn says the usual words as we kiss each other goodbye, a ritual we've been repeating for years. This time, though I do something extra. I entwine her hair around my fingers and press her forehead against mine.

"Hey, thank you," I murmur. "Okay?"

"I know," she replies.

"I love you, okay?" I say, voice thickening.

"I know. I love you, Riley."

"See you soon?"

"Of course. See you soon."

Robyn gets on the bus, and I watch it leave. As I'm walking home I finally notice the beautiful blue sky, the lump in my throat dissolves, and my summer smile returns to my face.

EAST OAKLAND PART II

ARIA SA'ID

I LAID IN HIS arms, my room lit by soft vanilla candlelight. Watching the flickering of light against the walls and shadows of my small San Francisco studio apartment, I foggily reminisced about the four hours prior to this very moment. The puckering of my anus felt like pins and needles with each involuntary squeeze, and there was wet lubrication smeared onto the back of my thighs. My neck was still warm, and my weave now felt dry and lifeless from the sweat and the yanks and gropes throughout the night. And yet this still felt like intimacy.

I could feel his tense, warm arm wrapped across my rib cage and his surprisingly soft fingertips gently gripping the underside of my waist. His warm breath through his nostrils hummed against the lowest part of my neck, steady and vibrating breaths almost like a metronome, clear and soft. I gently readjusted my leg from his knees' grip so as not to disturb him, the heel of my foot grazing his shin. With a creak of the futon, I anchored myself out of his grip and out of bed. The futon creaked louder as he turned in his sleep, scratching his groin through his red basketball shorts and releasing a decrescendo yawn.

"Come back to bed," he grumbled as he scratched again, and he pressed his head deeper into my pillows.

I stood quietly in the doorway of my bathroom, and I stared at this scene with an observational intensity, like a landscape painter. It'd been so long since I'd had a man stay the entire night that I didn't really know how to sleep with a guest. I have always been this way, I suppose, my hypervigilant nature impeding my sleep.

I stood there and I inhaled his presence into my life. I knew I had to lock away the memory of it forever. Here he was, lying asleep in my bed, his Adonis-like body almost glistening in the candlelight. The smell of his fresh fade and line up reminded me of Kleenex and alcohol and blue magic hair grease, his natural scent that of baby oil and kush with a tinge of Old Spice. He lay there waiting for my return to his arms. My ego assumed that it would be the comfort of my nearly expired, all-day Chanel scent that would finally fill his nostrils, calm him back into a deep sleep.

I glanced out of my studio apartment window toward the lights of City Hall and Civic Center, toward the city skyline, and I prayed this moment would never end. I prayed that I would have the comfort of my back cradled into his chest, that I would feel both liberated and somewhat vulnerable, trapped in his love, in this love affair. I prayed that there would be many more nights when I would tiptoe to the bathroom only to hear his half-growl, his grunting demand for me to return to his protective arms, that he would whisper *Aria* into my ear as we lay in the harmonies of breath until we reached REM sleep. I prayed that these moments would linger, because none of the previous moments ever lingered long enough.

I prayed that this moment would last even after the fervent vibration and backlight of a cell phone at 2:15 a.m., held captive in tangled sheets. I groaned in prayer that the phone calls and *where are you* text messages and iMessage notifications wouldn't interrupt or disturb our current embrace, prayed that the self-inflicted reminder of my number on his priority list wouldn't surface in my thoughts. I prayed that the next moment didn't have to involve condom wrappers scattered across my living room floor or lube stains on my satin sheets. I prayed that the cigar fillings of the blunt wraps would make it to the real trash can and not my reusable grocery bags next time, that the empty bottles of Patron and pineapple juice cans scattered across the counter would be optional accoutrements. I prayed that my sexual obedience and lack of inhibitions didn't have to be the obligatory, contractual agreement that I'd exchange for this moment, that he would still hug me if I said *No babes, not tonight*. I prayed that the hum of his breath would continue to vibrate within the hollows of my room and sound like a gently strung bass, harmonizing with the jazzscapes in my mind, with the murmurs of the city that whooshed through the cracks of my window pane. I prayed that his presence would be more frequent, maybe permanent. Because I was obedient, because I provided penetration exclusivity only to him;

because of that, he would embrace me, my longest pillow nestled in between his legs and his knees against my thighs.

His breath against my neck was warm like melted wax burners, warm cider in the kind of cold where your breath turns to fog.

I'll always remember that. I'll always have the memory of that landscape, of the echoing of my prayers, of the phantom jolt when he released my frame instantly as soon as the sound of a vibrating cellphone filled my ears. Its backlight pierced my half open eyes; the sound of a belt jostled across the floor, paired with the crack of air when jeans are shaken out. The ripple of the t-shirt that cascades across stern shoulders, his arms thrusting through the armholes with the sound like an old car backfiring. And then the sound of hustled steps across the room, toward my side of the bed. The familiar faint scent of Old Spice and kush and baby oil; the feel of a silver neck chain that awkwardly glides across my chin as he places a hesitant parting kiss on my cheekbone. The room becomes flooded with murmurs and movement. And he mumbles: *A'ight then babe, I'll hit you up, and yo, don't change your number on me.* My deadbolt door creaks open and is then forcefully slammed closed. It reminds me to open my eyes.

Silence. *Deafening* silence. The kind that validates loneliness and heartbreak as I lie alone, my bed suddenly cold and awkwardly indented with the impression of another soul, my breath hazy, my throat beginning to tense, to close in on itself. And I hold myself to sleep, sobbing, my eyes surveying the new reality of alone.

I have memorized that landscape many times; I have relived this scenario over and over and over and over again. In the many remakes of this moment, there's always a different leading male cast mate. As I kiss him while he thrusts me against the back side of the front door, as his brown fingertips quickly unbutton my black lace lingerie, my previous prayers echo in the forefront of my mind. As I usher him in a choreographed descent into the bed, there's a moment when I'm slightly paralyzed while I gaze into his eyes in between playful kisses. The intruding thought is always my hope and prayer once again: that the better portions of this moment, its intimacy and vulnerability and eroticism, will be mine for eternity. Somewhere in my mind, I know that the ancestors in heaven have cursed me to remain in this loop of yearning.

Exceptionalism is a cruel worldview.

"Stay with me," I murmur as I undo his belt buckle. He pins me deeper into the mattress. It begins again.

NINE MONTHS IN THE LIFE

JOHN SQUIRE

HIS BACK AND KNEES hurt all the time, and no matter how much he slept, he always felt tired.

“That’s normal,” his doctor had assured him.

Normal.

His doctor was the only person who called this *normal*.

Strangers stared at him whenever he left the house, even when sitting in the doctor’s waiting room. Well-meaning acquaintances asked uncomfortable questions and made those frustrating comments that they thought were supportive but that came across as invalidating and infuriating. He and his partner felt like they were stumbling along with absolutely no guidance whatsoever.

“Everyone feels that way,” his doctor had told him when he’d brought this up at his last appointment.

He didn’t feel part of everyone; he felt woefully alone.

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Some mornings he couldn’t find the energy to get out of bed. His therapist gave him a pamphlet about prepartum depression and offered to do Skype sessions.

“This isn’t well studied,” she told him apologetically. “You aren’t alone, but . . .”

Intellectually, he knew he wasn’t alone. But in every book, every pamphlet, and every mainstream website, there were no pictures of men, no mentions of Daddies, only of Mamas, and every pronoun was *she* or *her*. What little coverage of men consisted of sensational

articles about Thomas Beatty coupled with thousands of ignorant comments about how a man could possibly be in this position. The comments referred to him as “her,” and a smattering of them assured Beatty—as though Beatty read every penny-ante article posted about him—that he would burn in Hell for turning his back on God’s teachings.

He saved every article on the topic to his browser favorites. But the articles were always so *inspirational*. He didn’t want inspiration; he didn’t *need* inspiration.

He needed this to be over.

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“I saw an article that claimed that semen could help with morning sickness,” Jacob told him over breakfast one morning. The skin around his gentle brown eyes crinkled with that mixture of suggestive humor and discussion bait, looking to provoke some reaction: a laugh, a conversation, a rant, or just maybe a proposition.

Yet he couldn’t find any humor in the topic, his throat sore from throwing up half the night. “Semen caused all this in the first place,” he managed to rasp before staring down at his breakfast. Dry toast and water.

No more coffee. He’d never been much of a tea drinker, and he couldn’t keep hot chocolate down. Orange juice burned his throat, so raw from the constant vomit. But the water tasted like nothing, which managed somehow to enhance the flavors in his mouth.

Flavors like vomit, stomach acid, and dry, tasteless toast.

He must have looked as miserable as he felt, because Jacob reached across the table to touch his hand. “We’ll get through this,” he promised.

“We?” His stomach flipped before he could continue the thought, and he pushed back from the table. Without another word, he disappeared into the bathroom, barely managing to shut the door before heaving.

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The pregnancy and parenting class they signed up for boasted its inclusiveness on their website, complete with a little rainbow flag in the upper-right-hand corner. Still, when he and Jacob signed in and introduced themselves, he could feel judgmental eyes all

around them.

A blonde woman who looked farther along than he was introduced herself as Karen. “And what’s your name, sweetie?” she asked.

The diminutive felt like nails on a chalkboard, enough to set him on edge. They weren’t that far outside the city; didn’t she know that calling a stranger such a familiar nickname counted as an act of aggression?

“Elliott.” Then he pointed at his partner. “This is Jacob.”

Karen stared at him and shook her head. “No, what’s your *real* name?”

“That *is* my real name.” He didn’t reach into his pocket to pull out his wallet and driver’s license. He had no interest in sharing his last name, age, or address with this woman. He only wanted this conversation to end.

“What did your parents call you?”

He set his jaw, doing everything he could to keep the rage from exploding. All of his emotions had been boiling too close to the surface since, since—

Jacob touched his shoulder reassuringly and addressed Karen. “Speaking of parents, didn’t yours teach you that it’s rude to tell people they’re wrong when they answer your questions?”

Taken aback, Karen excused herself to return to her husband. Jacob’s hand remained on his shoulder, and Elliott awkwardly dipped his head to the side to rest atop his partner’s hand.

“I don’t want to be here,” he murmured.

“It’s only three hours,” Jacob retorted. “You’ve made it through three hours before. Remember the King Kong remake?”

That didn’t make Elliott laugh, but it distracted him from his unhappiness for the moment. He didn’t know if that had been Jacob’s goal, but his partner seemed satisfied enough with his reaction.

They found their seats and held hands the entire time. The instructor called everyone “Mama” and spent twenty minutes extolling the virtues of natural, intervention-free birth. She said that the C-section rate was too high, and she seemed to stare at Elliott and Jacob the entire time. When the topic of feeding rolled around, she only mentioned formula long enough to inform the class that it was inferior to breastmilk, and that everyone should at least *try* to breastfeed. If it didn’t work, they could get breastmilk from a milk bank and use a complicated tube system to simulate breastfeeding.

During the ten-minute bathroom break, Elliott turned to his partner. “I don’t want to be here.” He felt that he might cry, and he

loathed crying in public.

Jacob squeezed his hand and rose from his seat in one smooth motion. "Then let's go home."

Elliott struggled to stand—a recent development that did nothing to help his self-image—and, hand-in-hand, they slipped out the back door.

**

"That *hurts*."

"If you don't want this, why didn't you just say that when I asked?"

"I want to, but it *hurts*." Elliott rolled over and clutched a pillow for security. The pillow formed a physical barrier between them. That thought hurt too.

Jacob ran his hand through matted, dark curls. "We can get more lube." They had a bottle in the bathroom. Elliott used to keep it in his nightstand drawer, but he'd had to make room for painkillers, lotion, sleeping pills, Benadryl, and the two-pound bag of M&Ms he managed to go through every couple of days. It wasn't like the little tube had gotten much use the past few months anyway.

"I don't need lube."

"If it's hurting you—"

Elliott grabbed his partner's fingers, drawing them to his crotch. Jacob didn't even need to stick a finger inside to feel moisture. "Okay," he conceded, drawing his hand back. He rubbed his fingers together, slowly working the juices into his skin.

That used to be hot. Now Elliott only felt self-conscious. He didn't feel turned on, and it didn't look like his partner found the quirks of his body unique and sexy right now.

Instead, he felt bloated and cramped and slightly nauseated. Instead, Jacob looked frustrated and ... disgusted? Was he disgusted? Elliott couldn't tell, but the nagging voice in the back of his mind assured him that his partner must be disgusted. After all, he didn't look very masculine right now. He didn't *feel* very masculine, and that killed his libido as sure as anything else.

Jacob appeared oblivious to these thoughts, because he scooted up beside him again and reached out to tweak one of his nipples. Elliott gasped in pain. Everything felt too sensitive. He clutched the pillow closer to his body, as though that might protect him from ... what, exactly? Having sex with his partner? From the bulge in his belly?

Jacob seemed to notice that time, and he shifted on the bed. "We

could try a more traditional position.”

“No we can’t.” Elliott’s tone was flat, yet it contained a hint of frustration. They’d talked about this before, so many times. All of the information online about anal sex was conflicting, with some sites advocating it as an alternative to PIV and others warning about discomfort, infection, and tearing. Not that it mattered: Elliott had asked his doctor point blank and had received a stern warning not to try it because of the low position of the placenta. Pelvic examinations were so painful and difficult to complete, and though his doctor hadn’t diagnosed him with minor *placenta praevia*, he was apparently a borderline case.

“I don’t often give this advice,” his doctor had told him. Of course he didn’t; the bulk of his clientele were painfully cis and straight. He knew a couple of lesbians who went to him, but nobody else in his situation. *“But I assume you want to avoid PIV, so stick to fellatio and mutual masturbation.”*

If anything could make blowjobs and hand jobs sound unsexy, it was calling them *fellatio* and *mutual masturbation*.

Elliott saw the disappointment in Jacob’s face, and so he pushed aside the pillow. Then he reached for his partner’s cock. “Hand me the lube,” he murmured as he began to stroke the engorged member in his hand.

Jacob arched into the touch. “We could use your jizz.”

Elliott fought back a wave of nausea at the thought. He didn’t even like kissing his partner after Jacob had gone down on him; the taste and texture always struck him as *wrong*, not like Jacob’s at all, and being confronted with that on his person always turned him off. He could compartmentalize his partner touching or tasting him because Jacob usually made him feel masculine and desired, and because Elliott wasn’t stone. But it was worse now, off his T and leaking half the time. He never felt masculine now, hadn’t since he’d begun to show and the symptoms and *reality* of it hit him all at once. Worse now that everything set off his all-too-fragile stomach, or, worst of all, made him start to cry.

His fingers trembled, and he swallowed back the lump in his throat.

His partner looked at him through half-closed eyelids. “That’s a no?”

Elliott took too long to answer, his stomach doing another flip. “If you just want a hand job, it’s not a no,” he said finally.

“I don’t just want a hand job!” Jacob replied, a little too quickly,

a little too loudly. "I've been jerking off too much as it is."

Did he mean that as an accusation? Elliott didn't *care* that his partner masturbated, even if he didn't personally do it as frequently as Jacob did—or if he hadn't done it as frequently before this whole disaster of his current condition. He hadn't touched himself much since then, and he hadn't been as interested in watching his partner, either.

Elliott had taken too long to respond to Jacob's remark, whatever it was that Jacob had wanted to hear; his partner covered his hand, guiding it away from his cock. "You can say you aren't into this." Irritation crept into his voice. "It's not like you've never turned me down before."

Elliott tugged his hand away and reached for the pillow again. "Do you think I like all of this?"

Jacob frowned at him. "That isn't what I said." His words had an edge to them that sounded out of place in his partner's typically genial tone, and which certainly had no place when they were both naked together in bed.

"*I know.*" He buried his face in the pillow, choking back a sob.

They were both quiet for a long time, and it went from intense to awkward, with the only noise the occasional sob muffled by Elliott's pillow. Eventually, his partner scooted close again, and he felt strong hands on his shoulders. Despite himself, Elliott tensed from the touch.

"I don't want to fight," Jacob told him, and his voice sounded calmer than it had been a moment ago. Both the arousal and the edge had disappeared. "But it's hard ... seeing you like this, not being able to help you at all. And then whenever I try to get close, it's like you're pushing me away."

Elliott sobbed into the pillow again, which muffled both that sound and whatever he muttered in reply. He couldn't bring himself to look up. After a moment, he felt a hand move from his shoulder to the top of his head.

"Eli?"

He swallowed another lump in his throat and lolled his head to the side, turning one now-reddened eye towards his partner. "I'm not pushing you away," he croaked. "It's just . . ." The words died in his throat.

Jacob said nothing, only stared at him. He was doing those active listening exercises that Elliott found more frustrating than helpful.

"Everything sucks." Elliott's voice broke, and he began to sob

again. His partner wrapped his arms around him in a hug—not as tight as he might have once upon a time, before having to worry about Elliott’s bulge. Almost instinctively, Elliott shifted the pillow to cushion his stomach. Then he let his head roll into the space between Jacob’s chin and chest. “Everything sucks so much,” he said again, and he began to tremble in s partner’s arms.

Jacob didn’t let go.

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He didn’t want to have a baby shower, but Jacob’s family insisted on throwing one. They were all so thrilled by the thought of their very openly gay son and brother having a baby that they wanted to go all out. None of them thought to move from the traditional playbook, and no amount of protests from Elliott that they didn’t do baby showers in his family dissuaded them. Despite the hundred reminders that Jacob’s social circle consisted primarily of other gay men—all of them cis and all in relationships with other cis men, who had little experience with baby showers—they insisted. Guilt worked so well to keep Jacob in line, and Elliott used every bit of energy he could muster just to get out of bed in the morning. Neither he nor Jacob could mount a defense.

Elliott still couldn’t tell if having the shower at their house meant that they had won a battle with his in-laws or that they’d lost it. He clung to the idea that he could kick everyone out if the shower became too overwhelming, since it was his home, his party, and his physical and emotional symptoms. He’d never tried to kick out Jacob’s family before, so he hoped that it didn’t come to that.

At least they’d backed off about the gender question. He could only say “We didn’t ask” and “It doesn’t matter” so many times when asked whether he was having a son or a daughter before he wanted to scream. He and Jacob had agreed not to ask during appointments, they’d settled on a gender-neutral pattern and theme for the nursery, and they had pledged not to enforce gender roles. Even if the names they had picked out weren’t particularly androgynous, and even if both men came from backgrounds with certain cultural expectations, they didn’t think the intense gender policing needed to start *before* birth. He’d tried to explain all of that to Jacob’s family, only to be met with blank stares and then his partner awkwardly and abruptly changing the subject.

Something must have permeated, though because the theme of

his baby shower was yellow duckies and green. Not green frogs, just green. Gender neutral green.

And now he had to sit in a circle with a fez on his head, as though any of the party guests might confuse him with someone else, as though the giant bulge in his belly didn't immediately draw the attention of everyone around him.

"I don't want to be here," he murmured to his partner, seated to his right. All around them, Jacob's mother and sisters and at least two of his cousins, were tending to the kitchen, hanging decorations, and, bafflingly, lining a kiddie pool with blankets. He didn't know what that was for, and he was afraid to ask.

"I know." His partner took his hand and squeezed gently, reassuringly. "But it's only for a few hours."

Jacob's sister, Lisa, came through and set down a cardboard message board with a familiar picture pinned to one corner. Elliott frowned. "I thought we agreed—no baby pictures."

Lisa had the same smile as her brother, except for the fact that Elliott found it irritating rather than comforting. "Ma insisted. But you don't have to play!"

As though that mattered: of course he wouldn't play. He didn't have any baby pictures that he could show to other people. Not a single one. For that reason, he had convinced Jacob that they needed to take pictures of their baby in a full array of different baby clothing, from all across the spectrum of gendered baby clothes. No matter what gender their baby identified with when they were older, Elliott would give his child what he didn't have.

He had no desire to get into that again. Instead, he turned pleading eyes on his partner, silently mouthing: *Take care of this, please.* Jacob squeezed his hand again and then rose from the sofa, crossing over to his sister.

"I know it might not make sense, but this is pretty much the worst thing you can have here," he explained to her before lowering his voice. Elliott couldn't make out what his partner said, but he didn't care as long as that board disappeared and as long as they didn't play the baby picture game at *his* baby shower.

The one he didn't want in the first place.

After a few minutes, Lisa picked up the board and disappeared into the bedroom. Elliott breathed a sigh of relief. Jacob returned to his side, sliding back onto the sofa.

"You're welcome," he said, before Elliott could say anything. Once again, he reached for his hand, squeezing it lightly.

His partner could be so persuasive when he wanted to be; thankfully, he used that power for good, most of the time.

"Is it over yet?" Elliott asked softly.

"Another few hours," Jacob promised him. "You can do it."

He had his doubts, but at least he wasn't alone this afternoon.

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He wanted to sleep all of the time, but now he could never get comfortable. His back hurt, his knees hurt, his stomach cramped more often than not, and he had to cope with the new development: the shifting and the kicking.

The shifting and the kicking in the dead of night, just when he might nod off for few minutes. If he was lucky, the kicks only woke him up. If he was unlucky, the shifting put pressure on his bladder. Once he had wet himself, and the shame and mortification sent him under the covers for a full day after changing and taking a bath.

His doctor assured him that this was normal. His therapist told him that he had no reason to feel ashamed. Jacob, though: his partner tried to cheer him up, but Jacob didn't understand.

"Tell me what I can do for you," Jacob offered.

Finally, Elliott asked him to go into the basement and look for his baby blanket. Obviously, his partner hadn't expected that request, but he complied. It took a while, during which time Elliott managed to nod off twice, only to startle awake again from the shifting inside him or from the worry that he might roll and crush his stomach. Then, when he had finally closed his eyes, he heard a knock at the bedroom door. Opening one eye, he saw Jacob standing there, oh-so-pleased with himself, as he held up a pink and white crocheted blanket in one hand.

"Special delivery!" he declared, before he crossed to the bed. "Let me tuck you in."

Elliott shook his head. He reached out for the blanket, and once his partner handed it over, he clutched it in his arms, burying his face in the soft, thick material. "I'm so tired," he murmured, unsure if he was telling his partner or his blanket.

He felt fingers run through his hair. "I'll order takeout," Jacob declared, not waiting for affirmation. "You nap."

"I *can't*." He had told his partner this several times, but the suggestions remained the same.

"Have you tried everything?" Jacob asked.

"Yes." He had tried a dozen different positions on the bed. He had tried the sofa, the armchair, the empty bathtub, and, in a moment of desperation, he had tried the floor. Nothing worked. He knew he would get no sleep the first few weeks and months after the birth, but he had thought he might sleep before that. Instead his head felt thick, and he felt groggy and irritable more often than not.

He thought that this might kill him, where the shame and depression and isolation had failed.

The bed sagged, and he felt Jacob curl up beside him. "We haven't tried spooning," his partner pointed out.

Elliott didn't think it would make a difference; they had stopped spooning long before the shifting and kicking began, back when his stomach had grown big enough to show. He had still slept back then. And yet at the feeling of Jacob behind him, Elliott suddenly felt warm.

For a brief moment of panic, he worried that he had wet himself again, but his pajamas were dry, he noted with relief. He couldn't say how or why he felt this connection to Jacob right now. His doctor might blame sleep-deprivation; his therapist might call it his imagination. Those useless pamphlets had nothing to say on the topic.

Whatever the reason, he managed to relax a bit before sinking back onto his partner's body. His eyes fluttered, and finally, he managed to nod off.

THE SCHOLARS AND THE WHORES

PAIGE BRYONY

ANNE ORDERED VERY COMPLICATED cups of coffee. They weren't complicated because she wanted half a pump of this flavor or an exact two fifth's ratio of almond milk, nothing like that: they were just ice, milk, and coffee. They were complicated because she had paid for them with blowjobs.

She used to joke with the baristas there, back when she believed that bills and student loans and an occasional treat could be paid for with one honest job, that a blowjob for one of their coffees was a totally fair exchange. Six months and maybe two hundred coffees later, the thought still made her lips curl, and every time she got close to letting the straw part them, she set the drink down again.

Anne reminded herself that, in fairness, blowjobs bought a lot more than coffee. They bought her crappy little Nissan a tank of gas and a week of groceries. They bought her time, some space to breathe. The profit margins on blowjobs were damned respectable.

In her laptop bag were the file folders she kept for each class that she was responsible for at the community college, stuffed to bursting with midterm papers. It was going to take her about forty hours to clear the pile with first draft comments. And that time was unpaid. Only in-class hours were remunerated, \$36.50 per.

Her new night job, of course, also had plenty of uncompensated work involved. Advertising was a couple hundred a month. Writing ad copy for her persona as Melody. Screening clients. There's always homework. Behind every client hour was probably another four or five.

Anne bit down on the straw, took a long gulp, and gave an exag-

gerated sigh of contentment. Time to check email.

Spring break started tomorrow, so the only messages waiting for Anne were an automatic reminder from the college saying just that, as well as a confirmation of her first electrolysis appointment. Another source of comfort that had seemed out of reach until now. She replied to that one right away, took out the band holding her chestnut hair back, and then went to check Melody's email.

Notification of automatic renewal for Eros ad. Time waster demanding nudes. Schedule of next month's community dungeon parties. Time waster wanting to trade nudes. Time waster offering photo shoot for a freebie. Alumni association fundraiser spam. Oh shit! She laughed at herself and sent a polite request to the organization to lose her email as fast as possible.

She played with the idea of showing up to a grad school reunion as Melody, years from now. They wouldn't know Anne either, just Andrew. Did grad schools even do reunions? Fuck it, anyhow.

She put in her headphones, ready to turn on music and browse, when an instant message popped up on Melody's account.

You free tonight? Anne almost hit the block button right away until she saw the avatar. She recognized the face from her ads, where it sat in pride of place above all other local "TS" providers. They had only ever spoken once, when Anne was just starting out, and they had never met. But the woman was generous with advice and earned a lot of respect.

So far, Anne tentatively responded. Who is asking?

Marla, the instant message read. *Let me put you in a group call real quick, this is for real.*

And just like that her headphones were full of laughter, voices teasing each other in English and Portuguese, and her screen lit up with a half dozen new windows where women whom she did not recognize waved and greeted her. Marla introduced her to the group, which gave Anne a face to focus on. "I showed her what's what a while back; she's all right. And that makes seven, so ..."

So what, Anne wondered silently while Marla appeared to click through several windows on her end. It was strange seeing her at home like this: half glasses she kept on a gold and pearl chain around her neck, a wig stand perched behind her on a file cabinet where the lascivious curls from her ad rested during the day. Twenty years she had been in the game, since before leaving Brazil, and she could have been almost a grandmother to any of the women on screen. For that matter, the only time Anne had been around this many of

her own kind, even virtually, it was for group therapy or a memorial service. Somehow this made her more nervous.

But there was definitely excitement in there, waiting for her to admit it.

Marla seemed to find what she wanted, and a block of text appeared in the shared message space. "Here's the score, ladies," she began. "They're all squeaky clean gents, experienced, they screened like pros, good references. There'll be about two of them for each of us, no more. Six hours, but they're paying for the night. Oh ... and here's where we'll be."

The bubbling mirth as all of them took this information in piece by piece overflowed into a riot of awed expletives when they saw the uptown mansion ready to host them.

But Anne was still consumed by the list of names in the forwarded email. All of them were followed up with serious academic titles. All of them were respected, tenured, leaders of their fields. Ethics, metaphysics, phenomenology. All of them also had ties to the same school, even if they weren't currently teaching there; a couple had completed PhDs there but since moved on.

One of them, in fact, had featured very heavily in Anne's master's thesis.

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Four hours later, Anne was standing in the driveway of a three-million-dollar house with six other trans women, wearing preposterous lingerie underneath discreet outerwear, waiting to be let in to entertain the tenured faculty of a top ten university's philosophy department.

After being ushered inside, Anne could see that one of the professors was clearly emeritus. She wondered what kind of shenanigans he planned on getting up to, or if "getting up" was asking too much in the first place.

That was just as well with Anne, since she knew almost none of her own colleagues here either, by reputation or face. Some were doing the circuit, and one was actually a camgirl friend of a friend. The youngest of them stuck close to Marla, as much for help with English as for on the job guidance.

Anne tried to get her breath in the foyer as she folded her coat, surprised to find a manservant reaching out to take it from her. The woman next to her made a point of tossing her coat over the servant's

arm before favoring the interior with a contemptuous glare.

"Mmm," she remarked, clicking her tongue and then looking Anne up and down.

"What's up?" Anne asked, trying to sound gentle.

"It's this place, the neighborhood," the woman asked. "You know it?"

Anne looked around, blushing and staying focused on getting her teddy in place. "Sort of." She had actually done her undergrad a few blocks away.

"You know why it got its own police, its own schools, all that?" the woman went on. "Integration. That's why. They own all the city outside this, but their homes? Where they live? They weren't about to pay taxes or send kids to integrated schools, so they go and secede into their own thing long time back."

They backed up to let the cam girl's genderqueer partner scoot by with their money in a valise. Ze'd be waiting in their car, reading poetry and keeping an eye out, ready to come back if ze got an emergency text or saw a cruiser pull up to the house.

"My mom, she cleaned houses here," the woman continued. "That's how I know."

"I'm sorry," Anne said.

"Psh, she can go to hell," the woman laughed. "Threw me out for being a faggot. I'm here to put some stacks in my med school account." She lightly smacked Anne on the butt and squared her shoulders to enter the party. "Check your tuck and get ready to fuck, girl."

Anne reflexively looked down and got her nose tweaked for the trouble. But as irritated as she felt after being toyed with, she was not anywhere near as anxious, and Anne smirked at the woman as she made her way laughing into the crowd of women who were mingling with the agreeable, tweedy-looking men.

There were heavy leather chairs studded at the seams with brass nails, the hardwood floor protected with no doubt even more expensive and exotic rugs. Any wall space not occupied by floor to ceiling bookshelves, complete with a ladder on a moving track, held the stuffed heads of various specimens of game, each probably old enough to owe its last terrified moments of life to Teddy Roosevelt. Anne spared a thought for the ancient buck who had probably been staring at the same billiard table below for generations. She imagined that if she looked hard enough, she would find a historical plaque on the wall: *The great Ernest Hemingway jacked off in this den*

no less than a dozen times in the summer of 1930.

If there was a name for a mini-bar large enough to devote an entire shelf exclusively to single-malt scotch, Anne could not recall it, so she decided simply to call it “home base” and stalked as gracefully as she could toward the welcome sight. Fortune had favored her with a gentleman who was trying unsuccessfully to open a bottle of champagne, which gave her the opportunity to make a good impression on him and on anyone who heard the sudden pop as she freed the cork and poured bubbly for those with a mind to join them. The gentleman who’d been having trouble bowed to her and left five dollars on the bar top, which inspired Anne to grab an ice bucket and set it up to collect more. She was not licensed, but mixology was a hobby of hers, and they’d all be in substantially more trouble if discovered here than anything the alcoholic beverage commission could give her.

A whiskey sour tempted her, but Anne decided to play it sober with club soda and grenadine and to drink in the sights instead. Somewhere in this throng was someone whose work she had spent at least a week wrestling with. She well remembered the eyestrain from staying up past three in the morning on JSTOR, trying her damnedest to get caught up with the understanding everyone else seemed to have of philosophers she’d never even heard of as an undergrad. It had also been the first time in Anne’s life that she’d ever lived far from home, and her studies were more often than not derailed by searching for women’s clothes with a zeal she would not understand for a few years more. At least she’d figured that part out, she thought, bitterly cursing her inability to master the rest of it enough to be on the track these men had all ridden to lives of security and dignity. She wished she had thought to look up a picture of the philosopher on the faculty website.

It looked as though everyone else had gotten comfortable, and the conversation was lively. Ladies walked arm in arm and sat upon or lay across the laps of various men who held forth with great vigor about their work. The scholar nearest to Anne seemed to be arguing for the morality of prostitution from a utilitarian point of view while tickling the fanny of a lovely gal from Atlanta. Anne decided that her quarry would reveal himself in his own time, and instead she tried to see whether anyone had eyes for her.

As time passed and the liquor evaporated, many of the academics’ essential natures asserted themselves. There’s something almost noble about how a scholar can elect to argue an extremely fine point

with his fellow even while his pants are around his ankles and a nude woman is rubbing his shoulders. Anne watched as two of these men raised their voices and craned their necks around a beautiful lady dancing and stripping as best she could with Chopin playing in the background. They would have kept on like that all night, arguing whether justice emerges from an essential human nature or is defined by power relations, but Marla put a stop to it by putting the distinguished chair of metaphysics on his back and sitting on his face. Anne brought a drink to the victor by default.

She tried a little sashay to see whether anyone felt like a taste, but none of the gents showed interest. Everyone else seemed to have paired off or formed little groups. A logic lecturer was gripping the rungs of the rolling library ladder as he got the sense fucked out of him by a girl with the Bettie Page she had always wanted but could never recreate. The tiny cam girl sat with her leg thrown over a chair, drinking vodka from the bottle and arguing Maoism with her free hand knotted in the sparse hair of the Hegel scholar who was sucking her cock.

Anne's anxiety took the wheel, and she almost slipped bourbon into her soda. Everyone there was either an accomplished scholar or an exceptionally beautiful woman, and at least a few sounded like they were both. But Anne felt she could measure up to none. She was just some scrub adjunct who'd never been accepted into PhD work. She struggled every day to sound feminine and be taken seriously, and now here she was: surrounded by goddesses, women who mostly didn't even use hormones because they interfered with the work. Her future stretched out in front of her, and it looked like a hundred thousand freshman essays on why the US should legalize pot while she tried to save up for implants.

A strong drink was starting to look very good to Anne. She considered taking her mind off the booze and her future, beyond maybe cleaning off the billiard balls that had been used earlier in a crowd-pleasing but unsanitary trick. "White Russian, please," Anne heard behind her shoulder. She turned and opened her mouth to reply, but found herself facing an elegant tie. She had to look up to find the face attached to it, flushed more with humor at her reaction than booze and sporting eyebrows almost bushy enough to wave at her.

"Of course, sorry, bit distracted," she tried to purr.

"I see that," he chuckled warmly as if he were talking to a student he'd found pulling an all-nighter in the library. He was pointing

at her panties.

This should have been comfy territory for her. She was not new to this. Now's the time when she should toss her hair, hood her eyes with her lashes, and ask if he wanted to get better acquainted. And it was a very sensible thought, but instead Anne was pulling silk from her crack and stuttering. "Oh, that. I mean of course, that, yes. Yes?"

"Yes," he laughed. "Yes, that—if you've a mind to, hon."

"Yes, definitely." Anne laughed with him, nervously, and took a shot of sour mix instead of the vodka she had reached for. She made a pained face and coughed while he laughed harder. His laugh was a rich baritone, and comforting.

"I'm sorry," she gasped, laughing at herself also. "Honestly, I feel like I'm sitting for my orals."

"Ideally, madam," he began, "I would be the one sitting—or rather, kneeling—for orals. If you'll oblige me." Gently his finger found the lace around her inner thigh and slipped beneath to tease her. His other hand stroked her back and then reached behind her for the vodka, serving himself. "Are you working on a thesis yourself, then?" he asked.

Anne had already partially melted against the bar. It took a few deep, shuddering breaths to right herself and prepare to shut this line of inquiry down: if she went into the past, it would be impossible for her to do her job.

"No," Anne sighed. "No, I stopped after my master's. Too much money to find out I didn't know anything from anything."

"You could teach with that," he said, drawing his cold glass along her breasts. The cold went deeper into her, and she had already said more than she wanted to. So Anne drew herself up and decided to make him pay for asking.

"Teaching is my day job," she said, locking eyes with him.

He dipped his head in acknowledgment, thought a moment, then gently kissed the condensation of his glass from her nipples. Anne did not know what reaction she expected, but chose to accept this. It felt like a decision a powerful woman would make.

"So," he started again. "You wanted my job then?" His finger stroked between her thighs, under, and behind, until he had palmed her ass. His grin had restored itself.

Anne snorted and leaned into his touch. "Another department, actually. English."

"Your specialty?" he asked, letting the glass rest below her neck, dripping cold water down her spine.

"The nineteenth century," she giggled through chattering teeth. "Children's literature, the Romantics, all that."

"Where?" he asked. Her foot found the brass rail along the bottom of the bar, and she arched against him, using her ass to see if the rest of him had the same idea as his hands.

"Chicago," Anne answered, and he traded a knowing grimace with her.

"So where did they find fault in your work?" He finished off his drink and rubbed the small of her back with his thumb.

"I didn't understand Lacan at all," she admitted.

"No one understands Lacan," he scoffed. "If they claim to, they're a fraud." He set aside their empty glasses. "Would my condolences be too patronizing?"

Instead of answering, because Anne honestly did not know, she said: "I would much rather you take your orals now."

He laughed, and then he began to outline his thesis on her cheeks, along her ears, whispering into the hollow of her neck and tracing the implications down the curve of her breasts. Anne closed her eyes and let her knees soften, her legs part, and the fabric of her panties rise off of her with the pressure of her own sex. A steady sip of ice water, savored slowly, letting the chill of it race his lips down the length of her body.

Suddenly her eyes flew open, and Anne reached for his face, warm against her belly. "This'll sound crazy, but—is your work mainly about ethics?"

He blinked, but nodded assent. When he opened his mouth to explain, Anne shoved her panties down around her knees and gave him something else to swallow.

It was all she could do to repress a super villainess cackle. Her heart sang: *Victory! All your power, your charms, the blandishments of the academy: all of it was mere vanity, and here, on its knees, your own tenured scion whose dead words appeared alongside my own: here he kneels, free only to moan as he gets a mouthful of my own goddamn ivory tower. Cite these nuts, boy!* The glorious inversion of it all: across from her, the hoary heads of men who followed in the path of Plato and Aristotle, each of them bowed in submission to delicious bugger, asses fucked and mouths plundered by women with merciless, steaming loins, each of them the equal of Hercules and Hippolyta. They who thought to buy women with coin to set their table, now become a feast for furies, for Amazons! Warrior whores, spitting wise men upon their burning spears!



Anne saw a woman assume a man's chin for her throne, queening him as he murmured tribute to her like prayer. She saw a man bent over as another woman spanked him cherry red with a copy of Baudelaire. Descending from the second story, she saw a man whose beard was white with age and accumulated thought, his eyes fiery and his whiskers quivering as he took in the scene just as Anne had, the philosopher having emerged from the cave and his encounter with eternal truth. He wore towels about his shoulders and waist, which fell from his body as he raised his arms above his head: "*SYMPOSIUM*," he shouted, and then he fell nose-first into the spread ass cheeks of Marla.

Anne came like a banshee.





LACE

TEDDY BROADBENT

I ALWAYS LOVED THE feel of lace cradling my hips. There was something about the way it clung to the swell of my body—it was amazing how powerful a whisper of fabric could make me feel.

If there was one thing I needed in those hotel rooms, it was a sense of power. Johns, even the good ones, had a habit of taking a mile if you gave them an inch. I could work things out fairly well with my regulars, but new clients like today I would have to look out for. Every leering, dry-lipped smile promised another nudge, another gentle suggestion that wasn't quite gentle.

Speak of the devil: a timid knock on the door sounded through the otherwise quiet room. Instinctively my fingertips ran over my sides, feeling for the raised edge of my panties underneath my skirt. Was it for assurance? Did I need assurance after all of these years?

By the time I floated over to the door, all of the little things that separated plain old *me* from the sordid sensuality of *her* had melted away. It was the little things that, funnily, mattered the most: my shoulders would stop hunching like they always did, as if in compensation for the convex of my breasts. The way I held my jaw would soften. My neck would elongate. God knows I had never passed, but when I was working, I stopped trying. Hell, it was almost liberating.

My expression—neutral but welcoming, as I had always practiced—didn't move an inch even as I watched his breath be taken away. His eyes trailed me exactly the way I wanted them to. This was my design, after all. His gaze fell to my lips and rose to meet my stare, a moment of feigned politeness before it dipped to shame-



lessly inspect my wares. Chest. The pinch of my waist. The expanse of my hips, soft and supple like it was perfectly ripened fruit he was considering. He approved, if the way his lips curled was any indication. It was a strangely triumphant smile. I wondered why they always looked like they were proud of themselves.

I stepped aside to let him in, moving to the kitchenette.

"Lena, was it?" He was removing his jacket, draping it over the armchair as he inspected the view. The city sprawled beneath us like the limbs of a sleeping giant. He seemed like a whiskey kind of guy.

I smiled. "It is. You picked a lovely time of year to visit—the summer sun always makes the sea look so lovely. Although you must be used to that in Australia."

"Actually, Canberra's a little ways inland. Wish I had the time to see more of the city between meetings—the view's not as beautiful as you, though."

I didn't flinch at the word. In fact, I had the good grace to look just the right amount of bashful as I closed the gap between us, offering him his glass of whiskey. He was a tall man, forcing me to look up at him through my eyelashes. He seemed a little overwhelmed by it all, mouth falling just slightly open as I sipped from my champagne flute. Hesitantly, his spare hand settled on the curve of my waist, but his grip was unsure.

He was the good kind of john, though really there were several that fit into such a category. There was the good fuck; the good tipper; the premature ejaculator. Very occasionally there was a genuinely nice guy looking to get laid. It didn't take long for us to get into bed. All the while I was riding him, he looked up at me with a kind of reverence, his hands fisting the sheets in desperation while he forced himself to keep his eyes open, drinking in the sight of my body like he wanted it imprinted in his brain forever. Maybe he did. Maybe I was something to be revered—worshipped, even.

He wasn't great, but that look. I found myself writhing on his cock as the coil in my stomach broke, and I came hard. He watched like he had never seen something so amazing before, his eyes finally rolling back as his thrusts became erratic and his groans turned to strangled cries he wasn't even trying to withhold.

"*Ffffffuck*," he snarled, in a way that was surprisingly sexy. I was coming back down, keeping my hips moving, and the world was settling back around me, albeit in a pleasant sort of haze. While he had his eyes closed I watched him with a strange sort of fondness. Since when was I the type to feel things over johns? Things that

weren't impatience or frustration? They were customers; that much I knew after a long string of service jobs. This was the same bullshit; it just came with better pay. And yet there I was, smiling down at him breathlessly as he lost his mind beneath me.

His hips stuttered and he fell silent mid-cry, pushing up with all his might as he came. I uttered what may have been a slightly exaggerated whimper of delight, arching my back and gripping his hips with my thighs as I felt him soften inside me. His head fell back on the pillow.

"Fucking hell." His chest was rising and falling with labored breathing. I undulated my hips in slow motions to coax him down, and his hands fell from where they had been gripping my thighs. And for the first time at work, I felt ... it. The afterglow, or whatever they called it in the scandalous little sex section of *Cosmopolitan*.

"Fucking hell," he repeated, quieter this time. "Good girl. Christ, you look so beautiful taking my cock like that. So beautiful. Such a fucking good girl."

My smile wavered, and the glow dropped, shattering around me like glass. Just as quickly as I had lost it, however, I regained my composure, and my customer service mask reconstituted itself in the form of a sultry little smirk.

"You want a shower?" I asked. He nodded his agreement. The relief did not make itself known, not in my expression or my body language, as I moved to the side and let him get up. Even as he disappeared into the ensuite, the mask didn't crack. I couldn't let it. Wordlessly I picked up the envelope he had left and counted. My full week's rent for an hour.

Surprisingly, I didn't start crying the second he dressed himself and left. He wasn't quick about it either, giving me those long, lingering looks that he must have thought to be romantic. Poor guy. It really wasn't his fault. I mean, how was he supposed to know?

Leaning up against the door, I closed my eyes and ran my fingertips over the lace on my hips. It didn't make me feel powerful. My fingers were not my fingers; I was a ghost, piloting a body.

That was when the dizziness started. It always happened like that: dizziness, then nausea. I didn't have time for this. I was going to be late.

**

If hotel rooms had always been like a second home to me, then

clinics felt like court houses. The buzzing of the too-fluorescent light bulbs drilled a hole into my head, and the dizziness was getting a whole lot worse. I stared up at the industrial clock for longer than it should have taken me to figure out how many minutes until I could go home, to food and my bed and my Alexandra. She'd promised she would cook tonight.

"Ethan Louis?" The receptionist's tone was halting, and as I looked at her expectantly, I saw her double-check the name. Self-consciously I ran my fingers through my hair, feeling the way it curled up against my neck. It had been so freeing at the time, getting a stylish little pixie cut, but it was always just this side of feminine. I did have a paycheck to consider.

My face was still perfectly made up, and I was overcome with the sudden urge to scrub it raw, if only so the receptionist would stop with that look.

She waited expectantly while I stood to collect my things. My hands worked too slowly, too clumsily under the watchful eye of her judgement, and it took everything in me not to dig my fingernails into my palms as some kind of punishment for everything I wasn't.

Dr. Jacobs looked like every middle-aged, male psychiatrist I had ever seen: portly and balding to varying degrees. He was somewhere in the middle. He had kind eyes but a thin-lipped smile, and I had only ever seen it get thinner over the course of our meetings.

I resisted the urge to cross my ankles as I tried to make myself comfortable in the oversized armchair. We sat opposite each other, neither speaking first. His foot was tapping. I was slouching again, legs appropriately spread while I rested my forearms on my knees. I don't know if it looked as unconvincing as it felt. It was a different masquerade than the one I performed for johns, but a masquerade nonetheless. Hell, if anything, my visits to Dr. Jacobs were more rehearsed.

"You're still engaging in sex work." It wasn't a question. My throat closed up. He wasn't fucking around this week, it seemed. It wasn't said unkindly, or with hostility. Just exasperation.

I looked away while I tried to gather my thoughts. Funny how I could always justify it all to myself until someone asked me for a reason. Then all my carefully thought out arguments went out the window, which didn't exactly add to my credibility.

"We're thinking of getting married," I blurted out. "My student loan is almost paid off, and we're still considering maybe getting a place together, and there's just too much going on to take a pay

cut right now. Maybe a few years down the road.” That much, at least, was truthful; I didn’t want to keep doing this forever. My eyes wandered the room, settling in one place for half a second before bouncing off somewhere else.

Dr. Jacobs was quiet for a long minute. When he spoke, his words were careful, as careful as mine.

“I understand that the stability the money brings must be very comforting for you.”

“I couldn’t make that kind of money in any other field, Dr. Jacobs—”

“But you have to think about your priorities,” he said. “If we’re going to move forward with your transition, Ethan, you need to commit. You need to be presenting as male full-time if I’m going to feel comfortable referring you for HRT. You *do* want to start with hormones, don’t you? Is the money worth it? There are other jobs out there. I can’t even begin to imagine the psychological effects of being misgendered by your clients, day in and day out. You can’t live with one foot out the door like this.”

I felt the news like it was a steel ball resting heavy in my stomach, nodding my understanding. I did want the hormones. Top surgery was something on the distant horizon, but testosterone was something I could have, now, so close that I could almost feel the pinch of the needle, no matter how low the dose had to be.

I looked at him expectantly. “Is that an ultimatum?” As I said it, his thin-lip smile melted into a straight line that cut across his face like a scar. His kind eyes were sad.

“It’s just something for you to think about,” he said. “You know I need to evaluate your eligibility as objectively as possible. I know that living as a male in your day to day life has been a big step for you, and I’m proud of you for taking it. Now we need to think about how to get you to the next step.” He leaned back in his chair. “How does Alex feel about this? You two entered your relationship before you started identifying as male, correct?”

I nodded. “There was an adjustment period, sure, but she’s always been supportive. She loves me for me.” At that moment, Alex was all I wanted. How long until I got to see her?

“Do you think she encourages you to retain your femininity, as a way to reconcile your gender identity with her sexuality?”

No matter how many times the thought had run through my head, hearing him say it made it seem so much more plausible. I closed my eyes, and the mask was dropping in a way I could not simply

recompose. I couldn't even answer.

Dr. Jacobs changed the subject fast—how had my visit back home last week gone?—but the rest of the hour moved like ants swimming in treacle. Slow, distorted.

He bid me farewell with his usual firm handshake, walking me to the door.

"Just think about it, Ethan."

I smiled a dead smile at him. "I will. Thank you."

**

Clouds were looming over the streets of Auckland, pregnant with the threat of oncoming storms. It didn't start raining until I was on the bus ride home, my forehead pressing smudges onto the window glass as I watched skyscraper after skyscraper sail past. The gray of the city streets slowly gave way to the leafy green of the suburbs. We lived close enough to the city for Alex to get to university and me to get to work, but she had always loved the quieter parts of town: the old villas with their neat little gardens. She had always been so domestic at heart. It was why I was so surprised that she didn't bat an eye when she found out what I did.

Dr. Jacob's words were burned into my thoughts. Was I still a woman to her, in all but name? Hell, why wouldn't I be? I was a woman to everybody else. To the johns who fucked me. To Dr. Jacobs. To every passer-by.

I shut my eyes, tracing the route of the bus in my mind, only opening them as the bus arrived at my destination. Our house was a little older than the others on our street. By no means run down, but it could have used a lick of paint and a seasoned gardener for the wild grass and weeds that were poking out around its old steel fence and the thick slabs of concrete that led to our door. It was unlocked as always, and as I opened it I hesitated, leaning my shoulder into the doorway.

I ran my fingers against the grain of the wood, my eyes adjusting to the dim, earthy light. It was a comfort, after spending so long trapped between white walls. I dropped my bag in the hallway and smiled at the smell of cooking and the sound of Otis Redding crooning that was drifting through the house.

"Alex?"

She rounded the corner before her name had fully left my lips, and the sight of her smile pulled one of my own. She was a vision

in her sweatpants and university hoodie, hair pulled back severely, but the softness of her gaze clouded everything else. Big, sleepy eyes that were a deep russet, the rest of her features similarly as soft and as dark. She looked as if she had been sculpted with great care and tenderness.

Her hands found my cheeks, and I put myself on tip toes as she dragged me into a kiss.

"Hey, handsome. Long day?" Her hands didn't settle on my hips; instead, one cradled the curve of my jaw while the other moved to lay curled up against my chest. She stood a good half-head taller than me, yet the way she held herself against me always felt so delicate.

"The longest," I murmured against her lips, pulling her closer by her waist. "Dr. Jacobs doesn't think I'm taking it seriously. That if I was, I'd be able to give all *this* up."

Her brow creased deep in worry. "You'd know if you wanted to get out, and I don't mind. But—"

"But I don't want to."

"Did you tell him that?"

"Like he cares about that. And Christ, Alex, maybe he has a point. I mean ..." I trailed off, closing my eyes. The guilt hit me. Why couldn't I be more of a man for her? "It's not like I can get top surgery until I'm ready to quit. How can I kick and scream for T when I'm banking on the dosage being low enough that my clients don't care? Who's it gonna matter to?"

Alex's hand tilted my chin up, forcing me to look her in the eyes. Hers were so different from mine: big and kind and never as guarded.

"It'll matter to you," she said.

We stayed pressed together like that for a long time. Our bodies picked up the rhythm of the music, and soon we were dancing, too, neither of us daring to let the other go. She looked down at me, and it was beyond fondness. It was something that immediately made the blood rush to my face, my grip on her tighten.

I was not her baby girl. I was nobody's baby girl. But I was *hers*: that I knew with every measurable piece of my being. It was an achingly, desperately true fact, and no matter what was going on around us—no matter the thin-lipped sneers or the cocked eyebrows or the in between I was lost in—I could get lost within it as soon as my lips met hers.

I could get caught up in this burning need to be more than I was. To start a movement, to change the world. But I was just a seed

waiting to blossom. Until I knew how to bloom—where I stood, how to extract that yearning from the hollow in my chest and to give it to the world in its fully realized form—I could settle for living for something small and selfish, something like the way Alex kissed me.

We weren't dancing anymore, clutched too fervently to each other for that. The drag and pull of our lips meeting had ignited a fire in my belly. I wanted more, nipping playfully at her plump skin. Alex giggled in response, tongue darting out to glide wherever I bit her, and just like that the kissing began again, deeper this time. Her hands smoothed down the dip of my collarbone, fingers barely skimming my breasts as they made their trail down. She always touched me like I was a man. Skirting over the landmines, the uncharted territories that I was unwilling to explore myself, let alone allow another into. Instead she skimmed my stomach with her fingertips until they landed at the button of my trousers, playing teasingly against the grain of my fly.

Her mouth moved to my ear, sucking on my lobe, and all of a sudden she was pulling the zipper down, each click of metal releasing metal sending shivers through the basest part of me. But even then, with the flash of my panties peeking out from my jeans, she didn't grant me the touch of skin against skin. Everything was always about the buildup with Alex, and even as my body tensed in anticipation, she moved her hand yet again.

Through the all-too-thick denim of my jeans, she trailed my cock. I heard her hum in delight right beside my ear, sounding all too pleased with herself as she pulled the fabric taut around it so she could better admire the shape that lay against my thigh.

"Alex," I whimpered, grasping at her hoodie, "*Please.*"

She smirked. Fuck, what a smirk—everything that little quirk of her lips promised was enough to make my head spin. The truth was that in those moments, I was putty in her hands. There was nothing I could do to make her do anything when I was desperate for her touch. But lord, my queen was merciful. She conceded, pulling my panties away from my hips just enough to slip between them, and then just enough to let me watch.

I looked on with reverence as she took me in her hand. A stuttered inhale that I could not contain made her smile that knowing smile.

"Bag—c-condom," I managed to say. Alex giggled, keeping her grip as she dropped to her knees. Holy fuck, the way she looked up at me through her eyelashes, her mouth just slightly opened. She'd always been like that, enough to make a grown man weep. Our gaze

never broke while she reached for my satchel. Clumsily she rifled through the shallow front pocket until she found her prize, and her eyes sparkled in delight, mouth still working, somehow simultaneously chaste and obscene, against my cock. Elegantly, she stood.

Her movements slowed down, taking her time as she gripped my cock so perfectly, rolling the condom down at an agonizing pace. My head fell against her shoulder, but my eyes never left her hand. Of course, I couldn't feel a thing. It was the sight of it that drew every wrecked, ragged breath from my lungs and sent lightning through every nerve.

I kissed her, hard.

We tumbled back onto the couch, each of us pulling the other with clumsy, rushed movements that made it hard to discern who was leading who. I made quick work of her sweatpants as she tore at the buttons on my chest. My back hit the cushions, and just like that the cushion of her thighs were caging my legs in. Alex was at her most beautiful when she was towering above me like this. Her back arched. The strong lines of her form seemed almost cut from marble, but I could feel the heat radiating from her as my fingers sunk valleys in her supple skin. Her neck was long, held regally, but her eyes were half-hooded with lust and tufts of hair that had escaped her ponytail stuck to her face.

There wasn't a shred of composure between us. She lifted herself to hover over my dick, letting it probe gently at her pussy lips, but no more than that.

"Beg for it, handsome," she purred.

"Oh, god, *please*," I whimpered, hips raising pleadingly.

"Again."

"Please!"

Her thighs quivered as she sunk down, inch by glorious inch, nails digging into my shoulders until she had settled with our bodies pressed together once more. I couldn't take it anymore, my hips working on their own accord as I thrust up into her.

My head was spinning. Everything was hands and sweat and needy little moans, undulating hips and the sound of skin hitting skin. I watched her unravel above me, entranced. I'd waited so long for this. Not just for her, but for all of *this*. All-out, no-holds-barred, intense fucking with a passion that I had been told only existed in the fevered dreams of horny teenagers. The kind that made every cell in your body quiver.

I loved her.



I loved her.

I loved her.

Blindly she groped around until her hands found mine, pinning them to the couch, fingers intertwined. The roll of her hips grew erratic in its urgency.

We came together. Seeing her wrecked, grinding desperately, it was too much for me. It was too much for the both of us. Locked together, we rode out each other's orgasms as our breathless cries faded into well-fucked whimpers and exhausted panting. Alex arched her back one last time before she dropped, boneless, laying her head on my collarbone as I mindlessly kissed at her hair.

There was a moment of stillness. I felt her fingers moving in lazy strokes on the side of my hip. I loved the feel of her hand. She traced the pattern of the lace, pressing it against my skin as she savored it with her fingertips.

We would eventually have to untangle, go about everything. But we would keep each other close all through the evening until we fell into bed together and held each other again. I would be away from the white walls and the stares, and nobody would call me beautiful.

We kissed long and slow. There was no mask.



LONELY SISSY

DREW CORDES

I FUMBLE WITH THE key card at my hotel door. The timing for the unlock is too quick for me to catch the first time. I yank in behind me the garment bag containing my dress and my suitcase full of bondage gear and sex toys, which I never expected to use but also didn't want to be improbably caught without. I deposit the luggage beside the first bed and toss the garment bag on the second bed, nearer the windows. I try to ignore the familiar disappointment.

As I close the drapes overlooking the highway, I shut my eyes.

I imagine the smell of leather and the feel of a hand on my shoulder. A presence materializes behind me. I feel a mouth breathing deeply at my ear. I can sense its devious smile.

"Hey, sissy," the voice slithers.

My body instantly turns hot and my skin prickles. "Uh, hello," I stammer.

"Sir."

"Uh, what?"

"Hello, Sir." The hand moves up to my neck and turns me around. "Sissies like you call butches like me 'Sir.'"

I'm speechless for a second as I take in the gorgeous genderqueer butch standing in front of me. Short but shaggy dark hair, the warmest brown eyes, a look that tells me I'm in for it. Her body is bigger than my own slender frame, and she nearly matches my own five foot ten. The buttery leather from her jacket sleeve brushes my cheek, and its scent fills my head, nearly causing full neural shutdown. She strokes the back of my neck and widens her eyes slightly to prod my late response.

"Sir, yes, I mean ... I'm sorry, Sir." My eyes dart around the room as

she holds her gaze directly on me.

“Either that or ‘Daddy.’ That can be the one choice I let you have tonight.” She pulls me closer until we’re inches apart. I can feel her arms, shoulders, her chest. It briefly occurs to me that she is stronger than I am. “But I’m pretty sure I already know which name a little faggot like you will pick.”

In the hotel room, I take my hand from the drapes and brush my fingers along my nipples.

My breath is deep and my head is woozy. I look at her and say it. “Daddy.” My voice, without conscious command on my part, comes out softer and raised in its natural pitch by a full octave.

“Aww, that’s my good little faggot.” She continues stroking my nape, and I blush. She looks over to the side. “So, what’s this you’ve got on your bed?”

Oh shit. I freeze. My smile disappears. Hers grows larger. She knows I’m thinking, “No.” I know she’s thinking, “Yes.”

I open my eyes, turn away from the window, and look at the garment bag on the bed.

“Is this your pretty dress, faggot?” I have no reply. “Don’t you want to put it on for me? Show me how pretty you look?”

“Daddy . . .” I continue avoiding her eyes as her stare again bores into me.

“I know you want to. I know you’re just aching to be my little sissy.” Her free hand travels slowly down toward my crotch. My breath starts gasping. “You’re going to wear all those ruffles and bows, those pretty panties. I know you want to.” She laughs at me. “You probably wish you never had to take them off.”

I start audibly whimpering. My hips betray me and start humping air.

“Oh, look at that. My little sissy getting horny?” She pulls her hand away before I can find any friction and steps back, chuckling and admiring the little show I wish I had the power to stop. Then she turns serious.

“Put it on.” She crosses her arms and waits. I take half a step and hesitate. “Put it on for Daddy, you little faggot,” she snaps. “You know you want to. You know it’s who you are. Show me.”

I leave the window for the bed. I hold the bag up and pull the zipper down. The dress, its petticoat, and its pinafore spill out onto the bed. The sheer volume of frills, lace, and bows make it difficult to distinguish each item from the others.

I begin stripping off my clothes.

She watches me as I undress. I can’t tell if I’m more excited or terrified by the mass of pink in front of me. Once I’m naked, my hands tremble slightly, and she notices. Still fully clothed in jeans, mid-calf boots,

undershirt, and jacket, she moves in again toward my bare body. Her speech takes on a sweetly condescending tone, which flips the off switch on everything in my brain save messy raw desire.

“Aww, do you need Daddy to help you, sweetie?”

I hesitate. “Yes, please.”

“Okay, honey.” She disentangles the dress and holds it open, waist-high, in front of her. The back zipper, undone, forms a V for my entry. Her syrupy voice makes me weak. “Come on, sissy. Step in.”

I put one leg through, and then the other. She brings the dress up over my shoulders and hugs me, bringing the shiny satin to a close, slowly zipping me in.

“Doesn’t that feel good, sweetie? Don’t you feel like your true sissy self now?”

God, yes it does, and yes I do, but I can only nod. Her hand is at my nape again and I am in a state of perpetual melt. She takes the petticoat next and guides it up under my skirt, which grows large. Then she cinches the pinafore around my waist, the final humiliating detail, enhancing a silhouette that only a sissy dress can cut.

“So pretty,” she lilted. “So pretty in fact, that I think you need to see yourself.” Before I can even stammer she guides me to the full length mirror between the closet and bathroom door. I have no time to steel myself; the image confronts me.

A distillation of my deepest shame and my deepest desire jumbled into one—I cannot quite separate the two as I look at my lone image in the mirror. I am staring at myself, but somehow also avoiding my reflection. I look fucking ridiculous. And I look so fucking hot. This is the last thing I ever wanted to do, and the thing I wanted to do more than anything else in the world. I want no one else ever to see me like this. I want everyone to see me like this. I want a lover I trust to point and laugh at me for the right reasons. I am terrified of someone I don’t trust pointing and laughing at me for the wrong reasons. These feelings and more that I’ll never be able to articulate all occur simultaneously, belied by my face and body, which have fallen empty under my own gaze, in defense of the overwhelm.

“Tell me how pretty you look. Tell me how much you love being my sissy.”

I whisper to myself, “I look so pretty, Daddy. I love being your sissy. Thank you.”

“That’s my good little pet. Now I want you to lift up your skirts and show me what a little faggot you are. And be dainty about it, you priss.” She sits down on the bed to direct the show.

I summon all my strength to watch myself in the mirror. My

face grows hot and red as my skirt rises. I see my cunt and its scars. Where my dick used to be. Then a streak of cold tears through me, a dysphoria I never imagined existed, let alone one I'd feel. Of wishing I could have my dick back for moments like these.

My eyes begin to burn, and I try to suppress a few rising sobs. I see her face change slightly. She stands up and moves toward me as I continue holding my dress in the air.

"Yellow. You okay, baby?" She touches my arm as a few tears fall.

"I'm okay. Let's keep going."

"Are you sure?" she says.

I nod. "Yes, I'm sure. This is really hot. I want this."

I take myself to the bed and lie down. I guide my hands through the clouds of ruffles and pause at my clit.

She smiles back. "I want it, too." She winks. "Though I wish I could say the same about this pathetic little cocklette of yours." She paws disdainfully at my junk, hard and wet. I jump and moan, losing control over the first time she's actually touched me there.

I start fucking myself with fingers. In the dress, teased and humiliated, it doesn't take long to get close.

I give in to her. I whine and squeal variations of "Pleeeease, Daaaaddy! Yessss, touch mee!" in a lisp and tone I'm not proud of, but which makes the whole thing feel even dirtier and more primal for both of us. Wrong in all the right ways.

I start fucking myself faster, ramping up to come.

She pulls her hand away, grabs me by my hair, and snarls up close to my face. "Shut up you little bitch. You know sissy dicklets like yours don't deserve to come. I can't wait to snap a lock on a cage for that useless clit of yours. You'll never get to play with it again. The only release you'll get as my sissy is when you mess your panties from a dream. Maybe I'll let you out once in a while, but only if you can prove to me just how big of a faggot you are. It'll be fun conditioning you. The sissier you act, the more willing I might be to unlock you."

I feel an orgasm building and lift my legs off the bed.

"You'll have to start wearing the prettiest sissy dresses all the time for a shot at being unlocked. You'll have to start walking and talking and behaving like the sissy slut you are around the clock. For everyone. Maybe then I'll be nice and let you out of your cage. Soon the only way you'll be able to come is by being a giant faggot for everyone to see and laugh at!"

My entire body tenses as I work my hand faster, a dam about to burst.

"But on second thought, it'll probably be limp and useless by then. Or

you'll just come on the spot as soon as the lock clicks open. Poor little thing. Hahaha! The only way you'll be able to get any satisfaction once I make you my sissy is the way you're going to get it tonight."

As she throws me face down onto the bed, flips up my petticoats, and presses her strap-on into my exposed asshole, the orgasm finally breaks and pulses through me. It feels so good.

But not great.

On the bed, I meet the intensity with silence, as I usually do. No noises, just a sequence of sexual facial expressions, which has always been how I come. If only I could figure out how to fuck myself and work my clit at the same time. I ambitiously try to coax out a few more pulses that fail to arrive. I lie there a while, nitrile gloves still on, trying not to get any coconut oil, the best product for my post-op junk, on the dress. As much as I adore humiliation, taking this thing to a dry cleaners would not be fun.

I try to appreciate the value in what I just did. I tell myself the same intellectual, political truths that I always do. That loving myself and loving this part of me is important. That it is powerful to repurpose shame into something pleasurable. That embracing this pleasure is an essential part of my liberation from that shame, instilled in me by a culture that despises trans people and femininity. That the people who told me that sissy play objectified womanhood and femininity as shameful and subjugated were transmisogynist assholes who failed to see their blatant hypocrisy when organizing a Daddy/girl rape play scene later in the night.

I try not to compare this orgasm to the one respectful, satisfying sissy scene I was able to have with another person a few years back at a kink event in D.C. With her I came so hard that my silence fractured, and I filled an entire hotel ballroom with screams. My body collapsed afterward, crying in catharsis, shocked to discover I could soar that high with sex. My reproduction of her in my room here tonight is unfortunately the only legacy of that encounter. That, and an unyielding desire to slog through disappointing parties, in hopes of finding a connection like that again.

I carefully peel off the black gloves, toss them toward the trash, and sit up on the bed. I twist my arm and awkwardly reach between my shoulder blades, trying not to reflect too deeply on the always frustrating process of finding and undoing the zipper by myself.

THE SORCERER'S SUMMONS

DAEMYN EDWARD HAMILTON

EZRA WAS AWAITING THE day of his first summons. As a new incubus, he had acclimated himself to the subterranean cityscape of the Underworld, with its harsh shadows and warm lava. He learned the names of his compatriots, engaged his superiors with queries, and spoke kind words to his rare and temporary inferiors. Although he did not yet understand all the intricacies of the shifting limbo that was the demonic hierarchy, he maintained a certain respect for it. Most demons had been demons for centuries, even millennia; their forms shifted and changed, took on new identities or returned to old ones. Ezra mostly had the same form since he began his demonhood: twisty horns protruding from his head, an overactive tail, maroon skin, and a soft belly with a vaguely muscular frame. Only seven years into this form, he lacked the power and experience of other, more venerable demonic entities. Though once a human himself, he had bid farewell to humankind. Figuratively, that was; none of the people who had once known him had gotten so much as a wave when he left. Ezra didn't think telling an entire country that their crown princess had wished for an accursed life would go over well, so he opted to vanish instead.

Ezra had found himself in the service of one of the less capricious demons, tasked with tidying the hulking, echoing chamber that was her study. Amina was the antlered, big-eared Pith expert of the Underworld, self-directed for as long as she had been sentient into learning how the particles that made up this world worked.

Her beady eyes were fixated on the yellowed scrolls before her, which were scattered about her gleaming blue desk—made of a

crystal of some sort, Ezra figured. More than a few of the scrolls had toppled onto the smoothed and cold rock floor, and there were disarrayed tomes within the walls, which had been hollowed out to make shelves with further luminescent crystals embedded into them at irregular intervals. Parchment was a bit of an anomaly in the Underworld, as there was threat that the persistent heat might cause it to burst into flames with little warning. Amina, however, had acclimated herself to reading in this comparably frigid library she had constructed for her studies by putting on extra layers of clothing.

Ezra shivered in his usual attire. While his chest was bound, his shoulders, arms, and stomach were bare. Part of his garment was woven with gold, signifying his function as a being of desire, while the rest was dyed a deep and rich black, the same color that made up his loincloth and the jewelry that decorated his wrists, arms, ankles, neck, ears. His curled, golden horns gleamed green in the blue light. As this was his first time being in Amina's service, he hadn't realized that he might need a robe. He peeked into his bag to see if by some fluke he had brought along something warm, but it held only his usual supplies and equipment. Resigned to the cold, he started to get busy rolling tomes and shutting scrolls—no, that wasn't right.

"Stop."

"What?" Ezra turned, papers in hand. Suddenly, he remembered his niceties, and that it might be prudent to make better use of them when addressing his superior. "What is the issue, Mistress?"

Amina spoke in a gravelly voice, one that she apparently did not appreciate having to use. "I hear your skin against my research material. I won't have you oiling my fragile parchment with your sexed-up hands. Who knows where you've been?"

Dumbfounded, Ezra glanced down at the scroll in his hand and then back to her. "Then how might I go about cleaning your study? That is what I was tasked with, is it not?"

"I thought you were one of us—a demon, not just a sheep dressed up in skins. I must have been mistaken. Go, and bring me back someone who can use their Pith."

"With all due respect," Ezra began, thinking that Amina wasn't actually due any, "Pith is ... while not inherently destructive, imprecise at best." Pith was the magic that demons possessed and were sustained by, power gained through age and experience. He put the scroll he was holding back onto a nearby shelf: despite his bitter thoughts, he didn't wish to agitate his superior any more than he

already had. "I wouldn't want to harm whatever it is you're reading on these papers."

Amina's eyes didn't leave her research, even if her lengthy hair seemed like it would get in the way. She lifted a hand and waved him off. "I've heard enough. Go and bring me back a proper replacement."

"Fine." This rudeness was nothing Ezra hadn't seen before—he'd been underground long enough to have familiarized himself with most of the other demons, in one way or another—but to face it now reminded him of the fact that he still had a long way to go before he was completely recognized. He still lacked the Pith that other demons possessed. He still needed to prove his right to exist in this world. He seethed, swallowed the rest of his resentment, and—still shivering, both from the cold and his anger—stepped over her mess towards the temperature-sealed entrance.

But when he went for the door, a slice in spacetime ripped open the air before him. It was a portal with shifting edges that fruitlessly clawed at further space around it. When it seemed to have reached the limit of its expansion, the portal was three feet wide and twice as tall. When Ezra glanced into the portal, a completely different scene greeted him. It was dark—darker than the library—with only a few dim streams of light breaking through. He saw splintered wood and a silhouette dancing on creaking floorboards.

"You had better get me a replacement before you answer that summ—"

But the portal was a vacuum, and before Amina could finish her sentence, Ezra had been pulled inside, the cold of its destination already gripping his flesh, settling inside him when he breathed the air.

The disorientation of the pull on his being and the shift in gravity was significant enough to throw him off his balance, sending him stumbling into the dancing figure. He recoiled from the person, shivering.

"I'm sorry! I-I'm sorry!" he spat out in the same demonic language he had been speaking just prior. His hands gripped at his bag handle to make sure it wouldn't spill its contents onto the floor.

He felt lighter, almost buoyant. When he looked down, he realized he was floating above a glowing circle in a nearly collapsed wooden shack. He recognized it as a summons setup: the illuminated circle of sacrificial blood cast the room in a crimson glow. It was only after a few moments that he realized the silhouette had fallen to the ground. Their skin seemed too soft, too fleshy compared

to the demons he was so used to.

There was only one human language he knew, the Zeng'ith speech, and so he tried it out after years of disuse: "Let me help you up?" The words were almost entirely unfamiliar on his tongue, like recalling a memory he hadn't sought to retain. Ezra reached out his long-nailed, maroon hand, and it trembled in the cold.

What looked back at him was a wide pair of eyes, gleaming through long curly bangs. Beneath it, a bright grin bloomed across the shadowed face. A light brown hand took his and the stranger pulled themselves into a standing position. They had a fresh, ragged cut on their bloodied palm. Standing, the summoner scrambled around in the bag they had on their back.

In the red light of the circle, Ezra realized something: he didn't know how to gender this person, with their cropped pale, curly hair, colorful poncho, and baggy harem pants. Without even thinking, he had been looking for ways to fit this stranger into one of two categories, and when he found inconclusive evidence, something clicked in his mind: this person must have presented this way on purpose. He shouldn't be looking at them as though they were a puzzle to be solved. Shame fell over his shoulders like a wet blanket.

The person drew a blank piece of parchment out, and they gesticated in precise movements. Ezra felt the familiar feeling of Pith being channeled into the parchment and the link between it and the summoner. He had never been able to channel like that. And if this person was utilizing Pith, it meant Ezra was dealing with a Sorcerer or an even more powerful Omen: someone who channeled the magic of demons to use for their own purposes.

When the summoner handed him the parchment, his teeth clattered: "T-Thanks."

Words appeared on the parchment one stroke at a time, as if an invisible hand was writing on it. The first line he couldn't read, but the characters he saw made him recall the Southern Continent. It ended with a dot above a comma and a single curved line.

A second line began to appear. This line was in Zeng'ith. *I haven't heard a single thing you've said.* This was followed by another dot, a comma, and a curved line.

As he watched, a third line began to appear in long, elegant strokes in a new form of lettering. Before it was finished, Ezra looked back up to the summoner. They smiled and winked at him. And suddenly he recognized the symbols for what they were: ;)

For the first time in a long while, Ezra smiled. The stranger was

unperturbed by his fangs, which he considered to their credit.

He looked back down at the paper, which had replaced the earlier words with new ones. Two lines this time, as they recognized Ezra hadn't paid the third much attention. *Are you cold?* When Ezra nodded, the stranger dropped their bag to the floor, the wood beneath it groaning as they did, and lifted their poncho from their shoulders. They cast some kind of spell on it and stepped up close to Ezra in order to place it upon him. Heat radiated from the poncho, and when it made contact with Ezra's flesh, he stopped shivering, comforted by the warmth. His legs retreated into a fetal position in mid-air, slipping into the open bottom of the poncho. The varied colors of the borrowed piece of clothing were out of place against his gold and black uniform.

I apologize for any confusion. My name is Omid, and I'm the one who summoned you here. They took a moment to bow, their arms to the side and their head down in a dramatic display.

When he glanced at the paper again, the words were written in a single line that he could understand. *I admit, I hadn't known what to expect. You're more attractive than I had anticipated.*

Omid's demeanor turned bashful as they turned their head aside, a demure smile on their face as they threw their gaze up at him.

Ezra's body was soft, heavier than it had been as a mortal. Through the implementation of what Pith he had, Ezra had been able to transmute his body, little by little. It was painful each time, but he took it as the price of affirming his true self. Not only had his body gone from an umber human skin tone to the deep maroon of a demon's, but it had also shifted his weight, strengthened his muscle, and grounded him. His vocal cords had deepened, although he hadn't grown any hair on his jaw or chin.

The body of an incubus. Ezra enjoyed it, and called it his own. Although, due to the need for heat, it wasn't exactly in the best position to be displayed. This summoner, Omid, understood what sort of demon they called for, but Ezra wasn't sure he could deliver.

"How do I talk to you?" he asked himself more than them.

Yet they answered, having seen his attempt: *Oh! I'd forgotten to tell you. Write on this paper, and you'll be imprinting your words into my mind. Or you could cast the same spell as I did, and we could link our minds together.* The last sentence vanished as soon as Ezra had set his eyes on it, and was hurriedly replaced: *Actually, that might be a bit too quick for our first meeting.*

Before Omid could hand him a writing utensil, Ezra produced

his own blue feathered quill from the leather bag at his side. In the light of the summoning circle, it appeared purple. He wrote without dipping it into ink, yet freshly inked words appeared nonetheless.

He wrote: *Why have you summoned me?*

Words were produced before his eyes, right under the line he had written.

I suppose I should've known you'd make me say it. Why does anyone summon an incubus? I'm lonely.

The air in the room was electrified, charged by the summoning circle still in effect, still holding Ezra there. Even if he tried to leave, it was likely the circle would halt his passage.

I apologize. I shouldn't have asked such an obvious—

It's fine! It's fine.

It wasn't what he wanted to know, anyway. How did he phrase this? As he considered what to write, his eyes caught a glyph in the summoning circle. It was the demonic lettering for *Stability*, and it was embedded on the outer border beyond Omid. It would be what the summoner intended for their future from this interaction. Ezra was floating above the word representing his own current status: *Weak*. To the left was the symbol showing what he would get from the contract: *Power*. On the right—*Understanding*—was what he would give.

Before he could glance behind him, Omid began to explain.

There were no records of this summoning sequence working before, but the scrolls I pilfered said it was important for me to be clear in what I wanted to summon because no two summoning circles are meant to be exactly alike. Demons change from moment to moment, shifting, growing, decaying. Constant change. Truly an organic experience that means that the same summoning circle could be used for a different demon each time.

Ezra wrote: *I am aware of how summoning works. He registered how those words might come across. Thank you for explaining anyway. It is helpful to know your understanding and intentions.*

Omid nodded twice, and the curls of their bangs bounced as they did. After that, they stared right at him. *Do you accept this contract?*

A soft breeze moved through the shack between the split and ruined walls. A moon, pale and thin, shed light down upon the two figures through the opening in the shack. Against the circle's crimson luminescence, the moon's reflection was soft and dull. When he gathered a moment to glance behind him, he saw the symbol for *Estranged* on the circle's edge. He recalled his mother, how she'd refused to understand his plight.

He stared back to Omid. He needed to be sure. *You know how active contracts work, yes?*

Yes. Omid seemed comfortable in the breeze, even without their poncho.

Still, Ezra hesitated until the trees outside stopped their scratching against the dead wood. *I'll be yours to command.*

The strokes of Omid's magical writing grew darker, more deliberate. *I wouldn't ask you to do anything you wouldn't want to.*

That is kind of you, but the price you give is greater than me granting you my obedience. Ezra took a moment to gaze upon his summoner. They were not a child, and yet without their protective outer layer on their shoulders, he was easily able to see the hunger evident in their frame under their thin shirt. The weakness in their muscles, the desperation in their eyes.

What they said next was something Ezra already understood: *I have nowhere else to turn.*

Omid was aware of what they were asking from Ezra. This was what summons were: desperate people willing to give too much in order to gain what they thought they lacked. Omid was offering *Power:* this was how demons gained prestige. This was how Ezra would get ahead in the underworld. What Omid was offering might even be enough so that when Ezra returned, Amina would finally have to listen to him.

Ezra stood, lowering his feet onto the ground, red glow at his heels as he bridged the small distance left between himself and Omid. Lifting the paper to Omid's chest, he wrote over their heartbeat.

How long? After he wrote it, he took a moment to look at the uncertainty in their eyes.

Omid's response came slowly. *A year? Two?*

Seeing the summoner's hesitation, he used it. *You're unsure. I can't accept—*

Two years. Firm lettering, decisive pace. Omid was staring at Ezra, a dangerous daring in their eyes. *I want two years of your life, sweet demon. What do I give you to get it?*

Ezra's strokes were slow, gentle on Omid's bony frame. *Six of yours. And as you are dealing with an incubus, the contract between us requires consummation.* The words felt heavy in his hand.

Red illuminated Omid's face from beneath, their eyes black in the shadows. *Such consummation with someone as kind and beautiful as you seems an added treat. Six years of this waste to gain a better quality for the rest of my life is an investment, not a sacrifice.*

Against his self-serving motives, Ezra wrote: *The investment need not be so great.*

It's nice of you to care about me. I suppose that's why I want more of you. I want to be selfish.

The distance between them was so short that Omid barely had to lean forward as they pressed their lips to Ezra's.

I— He wrote without looking, their lips together. Yet when he began to write, Omid let the kiss end and pulled back just enough.

Yes?

I need to tell you something. Ezra hesitated, and shadows loomed around them. *Before you get over invested in me. Before you think my agreement to this is absolute.*

What is it? Their concern was genuine.

I was once human, he began. His hands shook as he wrote. A female human. Retroactively, he added an arrow between a and female to add supposedly right above it. Becoming an incubus, using my newfound Pith to alter my form—it's done a lot to transform my body into a reflection of who I really am. But there are certain intricate transmutations that take more power than others, take more precision, and take more stamina. Unlike yourself, a sorcerer who can channel power from multiple demons, demons only have their own limited amount of it. You will be, undeniably, granting me more power than I've ever had before, but as of right now, I haven't been able to— The circle beneath them sparked and crackled. To finish my transformation.

The night air chilled Ezra's bare legs, and Omid put their arms on his shoulders with enough space between them that he could still write comfortably. For a brief moment, Ezra wondered if they were going to embrace him, and his heart warmed at the gesture.

I don't understand that at all.

The gesture shattered. And here Ezra had thought they were going to say something comforting!

Yet Omid's text continued. I mean, I get the body thing. Thank you for being clear, but it just doesn't bother me. I don't think I would've minded if you hadn't told me, but I suppose I understand why you did. Although I also suppose it makes sense that you would think your body is why I summoned you. What I don't understand is the inner sense. I've never had a notion of gender like that. The only thing I've felt is ... a lack. They shrugged it off. In Akept, there are hive minds who refuse to be referred to as women or men, only as collectives. I've always felt most similar to them because I, too, feel the need not to be referred to as either a man or woman, despite being a single mind. They turned back

to Ezra, a gleam in their eyes. *Perhaps I do understand. You are quite the man-demon, and my body will love yours regardless of how you feel about it.* Mischief brought a grin to the sorcerer's face.

Laughter burst forth from Ezra's smile, and he giggled for a while longer. It was almost enough to shake Omid's arms from his shoulders. He wasn't laughing so much at the charming statement as he was from relief. At the relief of knowing that Omid didn't care about his body, the one obstacle he wished to overcome by accepting their contract. There was a sense of relief also in knowing that Omid did wish to not be gendered one way or another, and that he could choose his words with knowledge of their feelings. Tears slipped down his face and pooled along his chin. *Smooth, comrade, you are so smooth,* he finally managed to scribble. He added a winking expression of his own for good measure: ;).

Omid wrote again. *I won't pretend to understand your tears, but they seem benign. I want you to know that I convey from my heart.*

They are benign! He couldn't stop smiling. *You're the first human who has accepted me for who I am. I had given up on humanity before your summons.* He embraced his newfound friend, this agender human being who had led a tough life and who offered him understanding despite their own wish to gain it. With gusto, he lifted them, spinning about the circle with his arms wrapped around their torso. When he put them down, they seemed about as disoriented as Ezra was when he was sent through the portal.

Sorry, Ezra wrote. I didn't realize how happy this would make me. Thank you, for you've given me a gift I hadn't understood I'd been missing.

You're— Their words were slow and deeply written, as if they were still regaining their balance. *You're welcome. Very welcome.*

Conversely, his words were written quickly. *I accept your contract.* The circle's glow intensified, and he felt his own energy, his Pith, extend out to Omid's. *In order to fulfill it, you need to know that my name is Ezra.*

Their eyes took him in, his essence and his soul. *Ezra.* When it appeared, he felt the command it had on him. He was sure they felt it too, their energy, their magic, reaching out to his.

Whatever you wish of me, when you use my name, I must obey.

I have already told you I wouldn't wish to command you to do anything you wouldn't want to do. I intend to keep my word.

The words remained in Ezra's mind, but the two of them both knew that promises had the potential to be broken. And so Omid went on, breathing in and out in a sigh, as though resigned. *Ezra,*

they began, the magic in the air crackling in response. *I command you to pause and inform me of any objections you may have to any future commands.*

The intensity of the inclusion of his name was not lost on Ezra. Their words swirled around his mind, threatening to bind his actions. However, instead of landing, the words kept moving, slowly but certainly floating out of his sphere of inner influence. A small, happy laugh burst forth from Ezra, and he wrote in response: *Commands don't work until the contract is sealed. But that was a sweet thought.*

Embarrassed, Omid blushed, their cheeks growing dark and reddish. *Oh. My apologies. Now that you mention it, I do recall reading that.*

Don't get me wrong; I certainly felt power behind those words. But they're not totally binding just yet.

After a nod to affirm understanding, Omid lifted the tight tunic over their head and tossed it aside to reveal a flat and skinny frame, a bony rib cage. A sight to encourage pity, but all Ezra felt was warmth. *So, would you like to seal the contract with me?*

The demon stepped closer, his bound chest inches apart from their naked one as he wrote on the paper, bringing it once more to the human's chest. *I would love to.*

The two embraced, and soon they moved their bodies to the floor. The paper was put aside, just to the right of Omid's head as they lay on the floor, the blue feathered quill atop it with the red light of the circle shining from beneath it. Ezra's loincloth was cast aside by a quick unbuckling, his tail having flicked it off across the shack. He left the poncho on for the meantime, even as Omid took their baggy pants off to reveal a half-hard penis, and they lay beneath Ezra, naked with bony hips and erect nipples.

Would you like me inside of you, the paper asked.

Ezra nodded, and his hand dipped into his bag, which he shed from his shoulders beneath the poncho. He produced a vial of a swirling purple liquid, and he held it up to Omid with his left hand, writing with his right. *This is for safety. My body's internal temperature is much higher than yours, and this should keep you from burning due to prolonged contact with my insides.*

For the first time since the pair began this interaction, Ezra spotted a brief hint of fear in Omid's eyes. *I hadn't even considered that. I'm glad you're prepared.*

It's what we incubi do. Ezra winked at Omid. *It also happens to be an aphrodisiac. Don't worry, I promise it's safe. It's specifically designed for humans.*

What that also meant—which Ezra didn't mention at this point—was that he had never used it before, despite always having it on him. He popped open the vial to pour it into his hand, the liquid icy cold to the touch. He lowered his hands, one with the substance pooled in it, and slowly poured it on Omid's penis. His other hand smoothed the substance over their penis as it grew harder under his touch. The liquid turned to more of a semisolid as it fully covered the erection.

How does it feel? he asked.

Cool. Slick. But also like anticipation, a promise of what is to come. Their breathing became more even, slightly heavier as Ezra's hips angled themselves.

Abandoning the quill once more to lay upon the parchment, Ezra lowered himself onto the cock. The protective layer around their flesh made it feel cold inside him. As he worked himself into a rhythm, it shifted from uncomfortable to bearable to the best thing he had ever felt. The two kissed and embraced as he bounced, and the shack around them grew quiet as the slick sounds of their lovemaking escaped into the night air.

Ezra came quick, his hand on his enlarged clitoris as he did. As pleasure moved through him, he noticed beyond his physical pleasure that their energy was engaged with each other's, linked fully in a way it hadn't been prior. More than linked, he felt Omid's life-force imbuing him with Pith, transmuting into power he could use. The circle's light vanished as his orgasm marked the end of the required consummation, its duty to keep the demon contained until a contract was completed, until it had been fulfilled.

The parchment next to Omid's face was awash in the thoughts that moved through their mind: praises of Ezra's name, the joy of the union, the increasing feeling of being spent and fatigued. Soon they too reached an ecstasy, the height of orgasm achieved, and unconsciousness snuck up beneath it.

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The sorcerer slept for three days after that. In that time, Ezra returned their poncho and created a heavy cloak for himself in that time. The shed was a lot less gloomy in the sunlight, and there was no trace of the summoning circle left, save for Ezra's presence in the surface realm and the healing cut on Omid's hand.

FIGURING IT OUT

LUNA MERBRUJA

SHE SWEEPS HER HAIR into a high ponytail, tickled at the nape of her neck by the curly ends. She straightens her bangs flat across her forehead, level with her threaded and arched brows. She pulls on a plain red shirt and tucks her denim jeans into brown combat boots. She is ready for the first day of her last semester at Creek.

She plays her commuting playlist while she rehearses the courses and classrooms in her head: Lifespan Psychology in CAIN 330, Intro to American Sign Language in MURR 105, Human Biology in LYNN 108, and Chicano Literature in DAVID 225.

The first day of class, as ritual and procedure, is a word-for-word readthrough of each professor's syllabus. The best ones have a thorough class schedule that outlines every topic of every class meeting of the semester. The worst ones have ambiguous grading scales and vague assignments. The first day is also essentially a prolonged roll-call where students are dropped if absent. For most students, it's the day they see familiar faces, friends they'll sit next to for the rest of the semester.

For Laila, however, familiar faces only bring anxiety. Her own face has become unfamiliar over the past few seasons: her face elongated slightly, her nose pulled forward and rounded, no longer reminiscent of either of her parents. Her hips arched into width and her fat shifted into new places, settling onto her belly like her mother and mother's mother. Her boobs fill her hands, and she catches herself massaging them numerous times throughout the day to ease the tender nipple pains and growing spurts.

The start of a semester is another opportunity for her to reflect

on what she looks like to others, their stares evolving from gawking eyes to lusty glances in brief moments of passing. She had shifted into an object of desire, yet she fears her voice may incite violence just as much as her crotch.

With these feelings, Laila sits in the back rows of class to inconspicuously scan for familiar faces and finds few to none. This eases her turmoil until the professor of her last class, Chicano Literature, announces one of his rules: students must swap phone numbers with a classmate for a future group project. Laila hunches over her syllabus and reads the course objective for the third time as her peers shuffle around to greet one another.

“Hey,” a voice softly speaks behind her.

Laila flinches at the sound, but she makes no movement to investigate. If she stays still, she’ll disappear, she hopes.

“Hey you, you got a partner?” The voice speaks again, stronger and clearly directed at her. She’s afraid it’s someone she’s had in a previous class.

“Umm, no, I don’t,” she responds, and she turns around. The new face has supple skin a few tones darker than hers, shapely black brows, eyes like rich earth nourished by rainwater, a thick nose, and the kind of lips one can’t help but want against their neck.

Damn it. This is bad, Laila thinks. *He’s fucking fine.*

“Do you want to exchange numbers then?” he asks.

Laila blinks absently for a moment. His face is neutral, absent of the hungry lust or skeptical stare. The anxiety begins to flare in Laila’s gut. Nonetheless, when Laila is afraid, she challenges herself to be courageous.

“Sure, let’s do that.”

They pull out their cell phones and exchange numbers. “How do you spell your name?”

“It’s Alberto. A-L-B-E-R-T-O.” He smiles. “What’s your name?”

“Laila. L-A-I-L-A.” She laughs.

“Why are you laughing?” Alberto cocks his eyebrow.

“I don’t know? I’m pretty bad at this.” Laila drops her smile and picks at the polish on her thumbnail.

“Yeah, I can tell. You seem pretty kept to yourself.” His tone doesn’t sound judgmental, though, and his eyes soften as he glances up through his thick lashes.

Laila blushes brightly through her makeup, but before she can reply, the professor dismisses the class. She quickly packs up her belongings and waves goodbye to Alberto as she slips out the door.

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A few weeks later, Laila decides to study at her favorite Filipino restaurant, Home Cooked. Initially she felt uncomfortable returning since some of the employees have seen her pre-transition, but her craving for the best food in town is greater than her fear.

The cute girl Sarah is working the register. She glances up from a phone call when Laila walks in, and she smiles. Laila bites her lower lip shyly and looks above Sarah at the menu. She knows what she wants already, but she doesn't want Sarah to feel rushed.

"Whew, sorry about that. There's a big catering order that just came in for a wedding this weekend," Sarah shares in her angelic voice. Her ombré hair is pulled into a messy top bun, and her face is slightly greasy, though her makeup is impeccable. She has high cheekbones and a brilliant smile that reminds Laila of toothpaste commercials. Sarah is tall and lanky, her angles hard in contrast to her sweet personality. "What can I get for you today?"

"I'll get lumpia and a tocino bowl. Oh! And some calamansi juice, please?" Laila digs through her purse for her purple wallet.

"Okay, tocino bowl ... and a calamansi juice. Your total is \$14.55. Do you have cash or credit?" Sarah tilts her head in the sweetest way.

"Cash," Laila answers as she hands over a \$20 bill from her wallet. Sarah returns the change, and then Laila drops it all in the tip jar.

"Wow, thanks!" Sarah chirps, and she beams her commercial smile.

Laila returns a shy smile before asking, "Is it okay if I post up here to study for a few hours?"

"Sure! Maybe I'll join you on my lunch break," Sarah winks, and then she disappears behind a curtain to place the order. Laila furrows her brows, searching for an answer. She shrugs it off and unloads on a table in the back.

Fifteen minutes later, Sarah walks over two plates of steaming food and a cup of calamansi juice. Laila, her table cluttered with textbooks, notebooks, and a laptop, quickly clears a space for Sarah to place the meal. She thanks Sarah and continues to stack up her books to prevent a mess. Sarah returns shortly with a cup of mango juice in one hand and a steaming plate of chicken adobo, a sunny-side up egg, and white rice in the other. She plants herself across the table from Laila.

"How's the studying coming along?" Sarah forks a piece of chicken

and scoops some rice into her mouth. Laila licks her lips, but it's not the lumpia pinched between her fingers that's causing her to salivate.

"It's, umm, coming along pretty well. I am struggling so hard in my Bio class right now." Laila shoves the lumpia in her mouth to avoid having to keep talking. *She's so pretty, what the hell do I do?* Laila ponders as she swallows her food. *How do girls flirt with other girls?*

"Biology is one of my better subjects," Sarah says. "I used to tutor at Creek for a few semesters, so if you need someone to work with I would be more than happy to help. I may not even charge you!" She giggles and covers her mouth with her hand. Laila notices Sarah's acrylics are matte blood red, and she feels the color beat loud in her own chest.

"Uh, yeah, sure, that would be really fun! When are you usually free?" She takes a sip of her juice to keep calm. She can feel the heat increasing in her face.

"I'm off at eight tonight, so by the time I go home and shower ..." Sarah trails off for a moment. "I think nine-thirty is a good time. What about you?"

"That's pretty late," she responds hesitantly, not wanting to leave a bad impression. "But if you're okay with that, I am too."

"Awesome! I'll see you tonight then." Sarah rips a corner off Laila's notebook page and writes her number on it. "Text me your address and I'll bring some dinner."

"Yeah, for sure ... I'll text you when I get home."

She resumes eating as Sarah waves goodbye, taking her half-eaten plate and mango juice behind the curtain. As soon as Sarah is out of sight, Laila sighs and slouches, feeling full of butterflies.

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"What? Laila, you've *got* to tell me more! Did she imply that you were having sex?" her friend Jani asks excitedly later, over the phone.

"N-no, I don't think so. She just said she'd be coming over to help me study for biology." Laila doesn't believe her own self.

"Look Lay, I'm pretty sure the only biology you're gonna be studying is coochie. Are you ready for that?"

"Maybe? I don't know, I haven't really had sex before." Laila wanders in thought to the last time she was intimate with someone.

"What about that one person? From Gaymer Group?"

"Oh, nothing really happened. We just made out and touched

each other over clothes. Besides, that was pre-HRT.”

“What’s the difference?”

“I don’t know, lots? For one, I definitely don’t get as hard as often. But when I do, it feels different.” Her voice softens, nearing a whisper.

“You know it’s okay to tell me the truth, right? You don’t gotta be ashamed of what you’re going through,” Jani reassures.

“I know, but to be honest, I just haven’t really thought much about my sexuality since my body started changing. It’s weird ... like, I don’t *feel* like a guy anymore. I don’t know, having breasts and a penis is confusing to me. I’m not really sure how others would react? Or how I should even bring it up. I mean—”

“Laila, hold up,” Jani interrupts. “Don’t overcomplicate it. If you’re not ready to have sex, then don’t have sex. But I do think it’s a good idea to try masturbating a bit, just to get the hang of your body, y’know?”

Laila’s phone vibrates from a text message. It’s from Sarah saying she will be over in an hour.

“Yeah, that sounds like a good idea,” she says excitedly. “I got to go, I need to get ready. I’ll call you tomorrow!”

“Haaave fun!” Jani purrs.

Laila hangs up the phone and then immediately searches her bedside drawer for her vibrator. If she’s going to do this, she won’t have much time. Sliding into bed, she swiftly pulls down her pants and underwear.

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Laila doesn’t enjoy penetrative sex. She does enjoy stimulating herself with her vibrator, sometimes spitting on the tip before placing it at the entrance of her cunt. She relishes the wet pulsations as she strokes herself, focusing on retracting her foreskin over her corona with enough pressure to make her moan.

And she does, loudly. Grasping firmly on her dick, she shoves the vibrator harder against her pussy. She pushes and pulls the vibrator in quick rhythm to her strokes until her back arches, letting out a ferocious *fuck!* as her foreskin folds in her favorite spot.

As Laila approaches climax, she increases the intensity of her vibrator. She crosses her legs, squeezing her thighs around the pulsating toy as she quickens her pace. She bites into her shoulder as she orgasms, reveling in her faint musk. The intense erotic energy

rushes through her loins, up her spine, and through her mouth in a breathy release.

As she unclenches her grip, her body eases into euphoric rest. The buzzing of her toy is mute as she sticks her fingers in her mouth, giggling and tasting her sweet moment. She rubs the tip of her still-hard dick, flinching in joy at the sensitivity of her glans. After a long, heavy sigh, she turns off her vibrator, stows it back in the drawer, and pulls up her lace panties.

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“Do you understand that there’s two divisions in meiosis now?” Sarah asks while pointing at her impeccable diagram.

“I mean, yes, as much as I can right now,” Laila replies as she bites into a slice of cheeseless pepperoni pizza. “As the first cell divides into two, DNA crosses over on the chromosomes, then divides again, ultimately ending with four gametes with randomized DNA.”

“Wow, I’m impressed!” Sarah raises her glass of ginger ale towards Laila, “Cheers to the cute girl who faked ignorance of biology to bring me over to her place.” She winks before she takes a swig, leaving Laila visibly puzzled.

“N-no, that’s not something I would do. I mean, I did want to hang out, I, I just—” she stammers. “I’m sorry. Honestly, I do think you’re really pretty. It’s just that I’m scared to ... you know.”

Sarah’s face assuages as she speaks in a careful tone. “What are you scared of, exactly?”

“I don’t know.” Her cheeks flush as she tilts her head downward. “I think you’re really cool, but I just, I’ve never been with another girl before ...”

“Hey.” Sarah peeks under Laila’s downcast stare. “I think you’re pretty cool, too. And if you’re okay with it, I’d like to kiss you.”

Laila finds herself smiling. “O-oh, r-really?”

“Yes, really. I’ve wanted to since you first came in the store a few months back.” Sarah leans towards Laila. “Your lips are fucking enticing.”

Laila swallows hard as she closes her eyes and meets Sarah’s lips. She’s surprised at how soft they are, and how weightless her body suddenly feels. She feels like time has frozen, and every second is too long for how much more she wants to do.

Laila sucks Sarah’s bottom lip, lightly grazing with her teeth as she releases. Sarah moans into Laila’s neck, running her hands up

Laila's back. She grabs a fistful of hair and pulls Laila in for a deeper kiss. Laila exhales. *I am so fucking hard it hurts.*

Suddenly, she's struck by fear—she hasn't acknowledged *what* could get hard.

"Umm, hey, could we pause for a second?" Laila mumbles as she lightly pushes Sarah's chest away. "I, umm, fuck." She pauses, realizing she's starting to blank out. "I'm not sure how to do this or say this, but—"

"What is it?" Sarah folds her hands into her lap, giving the most comforting, worried look. "Do you want to stop? Did I do something wrong?"

"No, no, it's not that at all! I just, umm ... I'm trans?"

Laila sheepishly looks up to see Sarah's dazzling smile. It stuns her.

"That's cool. That doesn't bother me." Sarah reaches out to grab Laila's hand, but Laila flinches. "I'm sorry, you're probably going through a lot right now. Do you want me to go? Or what do you want to do?"

"I really don't know? I've never done this before?" Laila starts fidgeting, folding and pinching the seam of her shirt. "I guess I feel scared right now."

"Then how about this. I'll go home, let you get some sleep, process this however you need to. When you feel ready, or when you want to talk more, even if it's not about you being trans, text me. I'll be here." Sarah grins as she stands up and stretches. "How does that sound?"

"That ... that sounds good. Thank you." Laila exhales a nervous breath. "For everything tonight. It, it means a lot to me."

Laila walks Sarah to her car. As they hug goodbye, Sarah whispers in her ear: "I had a great time." Laila waves to Sarah as she pulls away, shivering from her parting words echoing in her head.

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The next day, Laila shows up to Chicano Lit class with a spring in her step. She greets the professor upon entering the class and glides down the row where Alberto is already seated.

"Hola Laila, you look quite lively today," Alberto comments as she takes her seat next to him.

"So what, I ordinarily look dead to you?" she jokes as she pulls out her notebook and pen.

"Ha! Whatever, that's not what I meant. You look like you're *in*

love, or you just got laid!" Alberto nudges Laila with his elbow, and they both start giggling. She's been great friends with Alberto for a few weeks, even though she often has moments of incredible desire for him. It's hard for her, she knows, to develop friendships without wanting more.

"Shut up! Is it really that obvious?" She glances around to make sure no one is listening.

"So it's true then! Damn, I'm good at this." He flashes a smug smile. "Were they cute? How much do you like them? Wait—are you in love, or having sex, or both?"

"Dude, calm down. It's definitely not serious. I am not in love or having sex, I'm just ... trying to figure out if I want those things." Laila stiffens at the thought of Sarah's lips against her neck. The thought is stopped short by the professor beginning his lecture.

"Uh-huh, suuure," he whispers. "If that was the case, why don't you figure it out with me?"

"Umm, what?" Laila's heartbeat races.

"Let's go on a date," he answers seriously. "I promise it's not because it seems like you're into someone else. I just didn't know you were dating. And since it seems like you are, I'd like a shot."

Laila is stunned. She feels conflicted, her desire and her fright balanced. Whatever might happen between Alberto and herself could blossom, or it could burn.

"Like I said, I'm trying to figure things out," she starts, "so I suppose a date wouldn't hurt." She is impressed with her confident front.

"Well geez, don't sound *too* excited—"

The professor's voice booms throughout the room. "Excuse me, Mr. Ramirez, is there something you want to share with the class?"

"No sir, I'm sorry," he sheepishly replies.

The professor resumes his lecture. They both start jotting down notes, glancing at each other and coyly smiling. Toward the end of class, her phone vibrates. It's a text message from Alberto: *Let's get together Saturday at 7:00, dinner and a movie?* She turns to face him, sees his cute pouty face, and then nods.



"Shut up! You brought me to a barbecue place? On a first date?" Laila chuckles as they enter the restaurant. A hostess greets them warmly and immediately directs them to a back table where a floor-to-wall window shows a half-moon shining brightly in the sky.

"This is my favorite spot," Alberto responds as he pulls out a chair for Laila. In moments like this, she ponders how much her mannerisms have changed. He opened the restaurant door for her, and now he pulled out her chair. She's used to doing these things for herself, but others throw her off, expecting her to be prepared for these kinds of niceties.

She absorbs her surroundings. There's a few solitary patrons at the bar, a couple television screens playing news or sports, and several waitstaff bustling about. "I do like the atmosphere," she says. "It's very cozy, and for such a busy place, it's not super loud."

"Yeah, my cousin brought me to this place a while back. It's my favorite place to come 'cause it's always so chill here. Plus, the food is pretty good." As if on cue, a waitress named Dana arrives with a confident smile and notepad in hand.

Laila puts in an order for the daily special: bison ribs with a side of cornbread and collard greens, with lemonade. Alberto orders his usual full rack of spicy ribs, mashed potatoes, yams, and water for his drink.

"She's a sweet girl," Alberto says to Laila when Dana leaves. "I've had her a couple times, but usually it's so busy she doesn't get a chance to register my face."

"I don't know about that," Laila says as she straightens the condiments on the table. "your cute face is definitely memorable." She flirtatiously smiles at Alberto, whose brown skin redds in delight. He crosses his arms.

"Wait a minute," he says. "Shouldn't I be flattering you?" He gives Laila a playfully stern look.

"I would not oppose it," Laila retorts as she mirrors Alberto's arm-crossing and leans back in her chair.

"My oh my, what's going on here? A standoff?" the waitress inquires as she places the sweating glasses onto the table.

"If it is, I didn't come prepared. This fella right here has the big guns though, apparently," Laila replies as she relaxes in her seat. Alberto flexes in his button-up for a moment, causing Laila to roll her eyes and the waitress to smirk.

"I better get out of here before I get caught in the cross-fire," Dana says. "I'll be back with your food as soon as it's ready." She darts off, leaving the two chuckling.

But as they talk, Laila can't set her nagging anxiety to rest. She takes a few gulps of water after every few sentences, hoping to swallow any deep vibrato in her voice. She refrains from making

showy gestures with her hands. When their food arrives, she takes extra precautions to embody daintiness and propriety, even while she's gnawing into a bison's rib. She's hyper-aware of herself, and she feels her mind stolen away from being fully present.

"Hey, is everything good?" Alberto catches Laila drifting away into distress.

"Kind of?" Laila begins. "I'm having a really good time, but I, I just—" She pauses, cleans herself, and takes a deep breath. "I'm transgender," she says.

"Oh." Alberto puts down his rib. He rubs his hands and face clean, and then he looks at Laila gently. "Thank you for telling me."

"Does this change anything? I mean, I don't know, I didn't know if or when I had to tell you. I wasn't trying to—"

"Hey, it's cool." He extends his hand with his palm facing upward. "I can tell it scared you to tell me. You didn't do nothing wrong. I still hella like you."

"Okay ... I'm sorry. I've only had one interaction like this before, so I'm still trying to figure this out." Laila leaves Alberto's hand open and extended toward her.

"Ah, that's what you meant the other day." He retracts his hand.

"Yeah." She folds her hands into her lap and starts twirling her jade ring. "Did you know that I was trans?"

"I wasn't sure. I heard some classmates talking shit. But it didn't change how I felt about you. I knew if you wanted to tell me, you would. And you did—so thank you." Alberto shrugs with a half-smile.

Laila seizes her opportunity to ask all the questions she had saved for Sarah. "So, so how do you feel? Specifically about me being trans?"

"I don't know." He shifts in his seat. "It's new, but it's not necessarily a bad thing." It was his turn to move through discomfort.

Her curiosity made her bolder. "And?"

"I guess ... I don't know. I've never been with a trans person, and I'm willing to try it out." He sips his water to clear his throat.

Adrenaline kicks in and curbs her appetite. "Is this just some kind of experiment to you, Alberto?"

"No, that's not what I meant at all." He sighs, frustrated, and rubs his face. "I don't know what to say, Laila. I'm also figuring this out. I know I like you. You being trans doesn't bother me. I'm scared of—"

Her shoulders tense and her eyes narrow intently on her date. "Scared of what, huh? What are *you* scared of?" She clutches her

napkin between both hands and watches him.

“Scared that I might say or, or do something wrong,” he says. “I like you, and I don’t wanna fuck this up. I’m not perfect. I won’t lie and say I know what I’m doing, but if you give me a chance and some leeway, I really want to see where this can go.”

He reaches his hand out again to Laila. She softly retracts away from him.

“Y-you know, I think I’d rather go home.” She signals to the nearest waitress and asks politely for to-go boxes and for the check to be split in two.

“Is that what you really want?” For the first time, she sees sadness in Alberto’s eyes. It hurts her heart to see him crushed by her uncertainty.

Reluctantly, she answers: “Yes, it is.”

They pay their bills separately and box up their leftovers, enduring a painful silence and sadness. As they exit the restaurant, Laila opens the door for herself. If she could have it her way, she would drive herself home, too.



Jani invites Laila over the next morning to process her feelings over a fresh pot of chamomile tea. They sit next to one another in wooden chairs, hands keeping warm around their mugs filled with scalding tea. The morning sunlight casts an orange hue across the room.

“What freaked you out?” Jani asks in a hushed tone through frowning lips.

“Everything. The making out with Sarah, the date with Alberto ... I don’t feel safe with either of them.” Her eyes start swelling. “I, I just felt so freakish with them.”

Jani leaves abruptly from her seat to grab tissues. She places the box by Laila’s mug and rubs her back as she resumes her seat. “Go on,” she encourages.

“With Sarah, things got heated really fast and it terrified me,” she says. “With Alberto, things were going slow, and it was sort of the ideal scenario of dating first and then maybe fun stuff later. But either way—I’m just scared of what they will think once they see my dick.” Laila holds herself tightly, trying to keep the floodgates of her emotions from bursting open. “What if they don’t like it? Or what if they expect it to work like any other dick?”

Jani nods while continuing to rub Laila's back. They share a long moment of silence. Jani inhales deeply, holds her breath, and then exhales gently.

"Sweetie, you won't know 'til it happens," she says. "There's a chance that they'll love the hell out of you and learn to fuck you the way you want. Maybe they'll be natural at it!" Jani chuckles into Laila's neck, who rotates her head to smile back at her friend.

"Yeah, I think you're right," Laila sips her tea. "They didn't necessarily *do* anything wrong. I actually think they're both the perfect people to experience dating and sex with, but I think it's more about how I feel about myself. Truthfully, if I was having sex with another trans person for the first time, I would be nervous, too." Laila trails off in thought.

Jani takes Laila's hands into hers. "There's no right or wrong choices. Dating and having sex is obviously freaking you out, so I think you should chill out for a bit. You don't gotta rush into something you don't feel good about."

Laila shifts to rest her head on Jani's chest, where she can hear her friend's steady heart. They hold hands and take several deep breaths. Jani strokes Laila's hair and holds her close. They sit in this gentleness long after their mugs lose steam.

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When Laila returns to the Chicano Lit class, she sits in the front row. Alberto stares at her for a few classes hoping that she will signal openness to interaction, but she doesn't look back.

After a week, he sends her a text message while she's at home: *Hey, how are you?*

She replies: *I'm fine, thanks for asking. I hope you're doing well, too. I'm sorry I wasn't clear on our date, but I think I'd rather not talk anymore. I'm going through my own stuff and would rather deal with it alone.*

And then, with the fervor of clarifying relationships, she texts Sarah: *Hey, I appreciate you being kind to me, but I don't think I'm ready for dating or anything else. I'll see you when I see you?*

With that, Laila turns her phone to silent mode. She lies down on her bed feeling relief that she doesn't have to deal with either of them. She runs her hands through her hair, dreaming of what she wishes could happen in the future. Then, with a hot fantasy in mind, she opens her bedside drawer, pulls out her vibrator, and

crawls under the covers. For now, she has all the stimulation she needs, and the only one to have her company and pleasure is herself.

HOOKUP CULTURE

PRETTY EYES ELLIS

HE WAITED AT THE bar, hands sweaty, barely touching his drink. He was afraid that if he started drinking now, one of two things would happen:

He'd gulp his drink down in one swoop, order another, and be drunk before his "date" got there.

He'd be almost done with his drink when the dude arrived, thereby revealing that he'd been waiting for a while.

He had been waiting for a while. He'd shown up nearly an hour early and spent half of that hour shuffling around the bar, kicking up sawdust that was on the floor, trying to make eye contact with no one. He'd finally mustered up the courage to order a drink. His voice had sounded small and squeaky, and the bartender didn't give him a second glance. He couldn't figure out if that was good or bad.

Part of him had hoped the bartender would strike up a conversation with him. Then at least he'd feel more at ease, like he belonged, like he'd come into this gay bar every Sunday night for the last few years and had a casual conversation with this bartender. The bartender had a slight smirk on his face when he'd walked up: had he known it was his first time in a place like this?

It wasn't his first time.

He'd come to gay bars before, always in groups with women, always in groups of other gay men acting as chaperones. Not often, but at least half a dozen times. He liked going late at night, on a Friday night; he could get lost on the dance floor, the faggots complimented him on his dance moves, and he could pretend he was just like the rest of them.

Now, on a Sunday, the bar was full of older gays, sad alcoholic fags. It was quiet and nearly empty and there were still strobe lights but no live DJ and nobody was on the dance floor and anyway he was too nervous to dance now even if there was.

It was important not to look too new and too eager, he knew that. He kept adjusting his binder and then looking around to see whether anyone had seen him adjusting his binder. He knew he didn't pass, anyway, knew that the binder didn't make much of a difference, knew that he hadn't been on hormones long enough to have a voice that was deep and masculine, knew that his femme presentation would have meant points off even if he was cis.

But he clung to the online exchanges he'd had with this dude. He'd been very upfront:

I'm trans

He had typed it with his eyes glued to the screen for the response, the rejection. When he wasn't rejected, he still could not sigh with relief. That had been only the first test.

I'm femme

The next test. His throat felt pinched: it felt like saying he had some kind of mental health illness, some disorder that disqualified him from any normal human interaction.

Who cares?

With that response he let just a little air out, and then sucked it back in.

I've only been on T for about a month. I don't pass.

And there it was. The awful, disgusting truth. No way would he even respond after that. Except that he had.

I date trans. It's cool.

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He finally showed up. My hands shook, and I hid them under

the bar. He wasn't attractive; that was good. Meant I didn't feel as intimidated by him.

I still felt intimidated by him.

He was very obviously a fag. Somehow this was a personal compliment to me. He didn't smile. Was that a normal gay-boy thing, I wondered. I tried to make my eyes look more bored. He didn't want to order a drink; he wanted to leave right then and there. I didn't finish my drink.

I thought maybe we'd have sex in his car, but he drove me to his place.

"So, uh, how many trans guys have you been with?" I asked out of genuine curiosity, also so I could gauge what to expect from him.

"Tons, at least three or four," he said. He didn't talk much.

He practically pushed me into his bedroom and onto the bed with no discussion. He was older than me and quite bigger than me, and I felt like a ragdoll as he jostled me around, taking my clothes off. He stunk of cologne and sweat, the combination making me dizzy. He didn't ask me whether I wanted to keep the binder on or not, just took it off.

This wasn't right.

"Don't worry, I won't look," he said. My face got hot. I felt blemished.

He held me down and fucked my mouth like it was any other hole, the sloshing sound quickening as he pumped deeply in and out. I was surprised, a little scared, and proud that I could take it so well. After a few minutes of this he flipped me over. There were dirty clothes all over his bed, and I buried my head momentarily, sniffing them, wondering how many other men he'd had over had done the same.

"Stay there," he said, as he went to get a condom. I was relieved. I wasn't sure how to bring up protection. He lifted my ass up and got in position.

"Wait!" I was finally able to muster the courage to speak "Shouldn't we use some lube?"

"Nah, you're wet enough." He felt my cunt, and my cheeks felt like they were full of air. I was angry that he felt he could just touch me anyway he wanted, confused because he said he'd been with trans men before, and I had assumed that meant he would know how to treat one, and eager, oh yes, still eager to have my first gay sex experience. I didn't even care that he wasn't using lube.

My mind hadn't yet connected the dots of what he was about to do.

He fucked my cunt. Hard and fast, though not as fast as he'd fucked my face moments before. It felt numb. It felt like sticking a pencil into a socket. It was both those things at once. I wanted to tell him to stop, to switch to my other hole, but I felt like I shouldn't question him. He was the real fag, after all. He could do what he wanted.

I was so fucking stupid, I thought.

He wasn't gay, he was bi. Of course he was bi. Why would a fag want to fuck me? He was bi, and he was fucking me like a woman, and I had to take it like a man.

Every stroke started to feel staggered. My walls were bunching up, stiffening, but not with the added bonus of any sort of climax. He offered me a joint afterward. I didn't want to smoke with him, but I also didn't want to seem ungrateful.

Maybe this was just a test, I thought. Maybe next time he'll fuck me different. Maybe if I don't wear lip gloss, maybe act more gay next time. Maybe if I'm just a little less femme. Next time.

Next time.

YOUR AVERAGE TUESDAY

AHI WI-HONGI

MEL IS BOUNCING GENTLY, her fingertips shimmering like the sun on the edges of a waterfall, her loose blond ringlets catching the evening light. I love it. I love the ways she moves, like her happiness and excitement just spill out of her physical boundaries. Like the sun, Mel just radiates into the world in a nonintrusive way, in the background quietly warming your heart.

I'm really happy she's excited about this.

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Today I had a random call from my darling friend Anita, who is kind of a lover, even though we officially broke up years ago. Anita told me she was bored and drunk and horny.

"Oh yeah, so it's like that huh?" I joked.

"Yeah that's how it is, slut," Anita teased. "Can I come fuck you later?"

I told her that my girlfriend would be home, and she said "All right, I'll come fuck you both."

She was always hilarious. So I'd invited her for dinner with no guarantees on the sex.

My girlfriend, Mel, moved in with me a month or two ago, after we'd been dating for six months. We joked and joked about never living together, and then one day we just did it on a whim. Our bedrooms are across the hall from one another. Hers has an enormous computer and mine has an enormous bed. Her bed isn't tiny, but mine is about two meters square: huge. I got it because my

lovers and I are always ending up three in a bed.

The only group sex Mel and I had done together was with her raven-haired long distance girlfriend Leela. Mel and Leela had been together for longer, and they had their ways of relating worked out. They had a really tight relationship, which had meant that I was the new kid and that most of the insecurity burden was probably on me.

The sex had been a super hot and very, very tender experience. She'd stayed for six weeks, and we'd really connected. Yet there had been a moment, when I saw the intense desire that Mel felt for Leela, when I'd had to leave the room and take myself outside for a cigarette and a little talk.

I asked myself: what is the worst case? Mel feels more desire for Leela and loves her more than me? Okay. Okay. Do I still get everything I need? Does she still love me enough?

Well, yes.

And does she desire me enough? Do we have amazing sex?

Yes, yes, okay, I can accept that. It might not be true, but even if it is, I'm okay with that. I don't need to feel as if I'm secretly on top of an undiscussed hierarchy. I think I'm used to being there, but it's good for me to not be there, too.

On top of occasional relationship insecurity, sometimes I get extra dysphoric when I'm with two trans women. Seeing and feeling how they relate to each other's bodies is beautiful and important and I love being part of it. But it can also sometimes make me feel really outside and inferior.

It's not like every trans woman is thrilled about the junk they were born with. But when they manage to make it work and have really great sex, it can be a really stark, in-my-face reminder that I actually don't have the junk that I feel I should have, and that they do, even though I know that for them it might not feel that way at all.

But just to talk about my own feelings: sometimes I feel like I'm smart and gorgeous and attractive and have a smoking hot fat brown body and mad sex skills and a great sense of humor. Yet I feel like people are into me *despite* my cunt.

When I used to hook up with queer cis women, I often felt misgendered by their cunt love. It seemed like their sexuality was based around vaginas, and I don't think that's okay. I'm attracted to women; I love women with all kinds of bodies and all kinds of junk. But women who are just into vaginas? That's a weird way to do your relationships.

It's especially weird if you're hooking up with someone who isn't

that into their vagina who and wants to have a cock.

Anyway, I know dysphoria is not a logical map to navigate your sex life. But sometimes it's the only map you have, and you have to improvise. Sometimes when I start to think my junk is kind of awful, I ask my lovers to tell me I'm nothing while we're fucking: that the most desirable thing about me, or the only desirable thing about me, is my cunt.

When someone who loves all of me says that my junk is the best thing about me, it convinces me that my junk must be hot.

It only works with junk-in-junk sex, and I don't do that with everyone. But if my lovers enjoy it and want to play this out with me, it really works. Being held down and fucked and told that my slit is perfect for goddesses to rub their dicks inside and get themselves off: it lets me skip past my worst dysphoria and makes me feel as if all of me is desirable.

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When I tell Mel about Anita's call, that she would come for dinner and that she was keen to hook up, Mel starts to bounce, her fingertips dancing.

"Omg," she says, biting her lip. "I'd definitely fuck Anita."

I laugh. "Okay, awesome. I mean, let's see how we feel later and stuff. It's fine if you change your mind."

"I'm not gonna change my mind. I want to fuck her," she says, grinning with her incredible mouth, one side of it flicking up diabolically.

She has this kind of innocent outward expression: she enunciates her English "properly," she doesn't make sexual innuendo, she wears clothes that aren't especially tight or short or low cut and that don't accentuate her perfect tits or her cute round butt. She almost comes across respectable, which is not something my crowd is even trying, let alone remotely succeeding at. But then, when you look closer, she has "fuck the system" written all over her.

This particular smile is the best.

Anita arrives. She's a stunning pink haired punk rock alt suicide girl, covered in ink, who got tattoos to match mine and who taught me a thing or two about life and about my desires. After dinner I disappear to my room for a while to give Anita and Mel space to get to know each other. They've only hung out together a few times, and I've always been there. So I go make my bed, put my clothes away,

make sure my harness and strap-on and magic wand are clean and in my bedside drawer. Get the gloves out.

Mel and I are fluid bound—sharing body fluids, fucking without condoms—but we always use protection with other people. We do have unprotected oral with other people though, if it's recreational. We use condoms for everything if it's work. The thought crosses my mind that they might want to have junk in junk sex, so I look for the right sized condoms for everyone, the water based lube for Mel and the silicone lube for Anita.

It's one of the great things about poly, the ways you can all make each other's experiences more seamless. I remember when Leela was still in town, after a big trip into the forest to look at some old bunkers. We got back home and took a hot bath. In the bedroom, Leela asked Mel about other buildings, for example, the Eiffel Tower (wink, wink.) She had her cute soft junk in my mouth, and Mel was sliding inside my pussy from the other end, and I was way too overwhelmed with cosmic sparkles to ask what the Eiffel Tower meant. It turned out to be spit roasting someone while you high-fived, forming the top of the tower.

Wild.

I love the outrageous antics that happen when you're three in a bed. I'm so excited I can't think straight. I'm wondering what tonight will be like.

Back in the lounge, Mel and Anita are sitting close to each other, talking and laughing. I pour us all a wine and Anita goes off to the bathroom. Mel is giving me overwhelmed eyes, she's so excited she's going to explode. I climb onto the sofa, slide my arm around her slender waist, and kiss her soft, luscious lips. She melts in my arms. I love the way she does that, and I'm instantly wet.

I run my fingers through her soft blond hair, pulling it playfully when I get to the back. She sighs and breathes deeply, her willowy arms around me, hand sliding into the crease between my fat bum and my soft inner thigh.

My right hand finds her bra clasp and undoes it. She pulls her top off as my lips close over her puffy pubescent nipple, and my warm tongue sucks it up into my mouth. She gasps and groans, her hips rotating. Her dick is hard in her jeans, and she's rubbing it against my leg.

The bathroom door creaks, and I hear Anita enter the room quietly. I put my left hand in the air and beckon her over. She and I have been here a hundred times with different lovers. I'm welcoming

her into our love.

Anita sits behind Mel, running her fingers down Mel's back, as I lean forward to meet Anita's lips. It's been a long time, maybe a year, and the connection is electric. Memories flood my heart. I remember sewing her legs with fishing line thread, so she couldn't move, in a room full of onlookers at a fetish event. Drying her hair in the sunshine after my whole household had head lice. The time I updated her Facebook status to say that we were married and she got angry. When I got really sick and she looked after me. The first time she said she loved me.

Now, on the sofa in my lounge, Anita is kissing Mel from behind, and I'm sucking Mel's tits, and we're all writhing and skin and claws. We make it to the bedroom and I'm kissing Anita and pulling her clothes off her beautiful bronzed body, her ink surreal as the sunset glow hits it through the window. She's been working in a physical outdoor job, she's tanned, and her arms have become stronger than they used to be. I wonder if I would still beat her at wrestling.

Anita has this powerful presence which ignites my primal fire. Feeling her salty skin against mine, I want to fight her for dominance, and I want to lose. I probably would. Her long, painted nails are sharp in my back, and she bites me hard. I'm present in my body in this moment. I'm kissing her throat in a sea of pink hair and squeezing her beautiful tits. She pulls my face up and into her smoldering gaze.

"Fuck, I've missed you," she says, with a delicious smile that sends a euphoric wave over my body.

Mel is perched on my bed in her adorable cotton knickers and nothing else. She's looking at me with this look: it's desire and lust, and it's also like it's just hit her that Anita and I know each other so intimately and have years of love, deep, complex shared history, and desire between us. I realize that she was probably imagining Anita as a sexy new addition to our relationship. Now she may have just reframed herself as the new addition. She looks a little innocent, a tiny bit terrified, and very, very aroused.

The anticipation in the air has reached 98 percent saturation. I feel like Anita and I are lions, and Mel doesn't know what she's in for.

I almost feel bad about it.

Then again, maybe she's just giving me this look because she knows it gives me complicated feelings, and she wants to fuck with me. Sweet, beautiful Mel is the most hypersexual of any woman I've ever been with. She's also an A-grade exhibitionist and a sex

worker, like the rest of us. She's no innocent, by any means.

Maybe she's giving me that look because she knows I'll like it.

Mel lies back on the bed in front of me and spreads her legs. I slide up between them, bringing my knees to rest outside her hips as I kneel with my swollen clit pressed into her perineum. I run my hands up her body, holding her wrists as I lean in to kiss her lips. She sucks my tongue and bites me playfully.

"Oh, did you want something?" she teases.

Anita is next to me, caressing her junk. She brings it in close to my face, and I try to kiss it, but I can't reach. Mel shifts to her hands and knees, and we start kissing Anita's junk together. Anita puts her hands in Mel's curls, and Mel starts sucking Anita's junk juicily. What a sight: Mel's luscious lips around Anita's gorgeous junk.

A perfect combination.

I move behind Mel, sliding my hand over her knickers, down her bum, between her legs, and I rub her dick through the fabric. She's moaning with her mouth stuffed full. I pull her underwear down and inhale her intoxicating scent as my mouth finds her pink asshole. Her back arches, her asshole is slippery under my tongue, my hand is between her legs, and she is thrusting her pretty dick into it with small, fast movements.

I come up to meet her asshole with my clit, one hand on her hip. The other dashes along her spine to pull her sandy hair, tipping her head back and opening her mouth for Anita to fuck.

Later, when Anita jumps off the bed to get another condom, Mel flips me over onto my back, runs her fingertips over my body, and slides her dick into my throat. I'm laying with my head over the side of the bed, and Mel is standing over me—her perky tits pointing at the ceiling—and slipping her dick right into my throat. She knows that if I'm laying on my back I probably won't vomit, so it can go all the way to the base. I can feel the head popping past the muscles at the top of my throat, squeezing my throat pipe open as it slides all the way down to my collar bone, toward my chest. She loves to make me gag really hard. It's so hot: I love it when I can't breathe and my body freaks out. But I know I'm safe, and I want this.

Sometime when Mel and I are doing sexual stuff, I kind of identify more with her than with myself. I used to worry I was doing some weird appropriative thing until I realized that it's just okay to connect with people in that way. Part of it is about imagining what it would feel like to slip your junk inside someone's body: to be welcomed inside someone like that, and yes, to have a dick that

feels. Another part is probably just that I love her, and I think about how she feels.

She's the only person I ever let put their hands on the back of my head when I'm going down on them. I don't trust just anyone with my ability to breathe. I kind of want her to get carried away.

Deep in the night, the flames of passion become embers: warm, held, knowing embraces. I lay on the bed, watching Anita's long fluro nails trace the curves of Mel's body and Mel pushing Anita over sleepily on the bed: their tender moments, soft kisses, the way they make fun of me and laugh at my threesome etiquette. And I feel my heart overflow with happiness. I feel so incredibly lucky to be here for this, and to have a poly family that can include this.

In the growing light of the morning, we curl our bodies around one another: safe, exhausted, sleepy creatures.



GREASE FOR A PHANTOM NOISE

RIAN J. LLOYD

“CALEB, DON’T TOUCH THAT,” Tris called out. Her nephew was reaching for a sharp piece of snapped rebar as he climbed to the top of the junk pile. He was six years old, and he loved danger even more than she did. Her thirst for adrenaline rushes had dried up with the first wave of zombie attacks, when she’d become the sole guardian of Caleb.

She kept him in the corner of her eye as she dug around the pile of twisted, rusted metal. Somewhere in this heap there had to be the part she was looking for. It wasn’t anything fancy, just hard to come by: a clamp that would help her fix a set of rear brakes. She pulled out a rusted bicycle from under a decaying queen-sized mattress and carried it down to pile on top of the rest of her collection. Even if these sad and broken bikes didn’t have anything immediately useful, they would come in handy later for some future bike mechanic emergency.

“Caleb,” she called. Her nephew had disappeared over to the other side of the garbage mound. “Time to go home.” The sun was starting to dip in the sky, and it would take her a long time to haul the pile of bikes back to their camp. She wasn’t going to have any luck finding that part today.

“Coming!” he said, jumping from a smashed TV to the hood of a car and then down to her. Together they strapped down the bikes to the makeshift rolling cart, and Tris pulled the rope over her shoulder, bracing herself against the dirt. She pulled until the cart overcame its inertia and rolled along behind her. One day she would make a trailer for her bike that was large enough to carry

bikes, but for now she took Caleb's hand. He held onto her tightly. He always had. He had only ever known her and her love for him. She had kept him safe for five years, and she would protect him for as long as he needed her to.

It was the least Tris owed her sister—Caleb's mother—after she'd shot her in the zombified brains.

They walked in silence, comfortable with each other, while Tris tried to ignore the nervousness bubbling in her belly. It was like this every time she returned to camp. There was always a part of her that told her it was safer to walk away. She knew the way people would stare at her when she returned, out of the corners of their eyes, afraid she would catch them. It was different than the way men had stared at her before the end-times. They had been filled with hate and fear. Now the people she co-habitated with only looked apprehensive and distrustful. She couldn't do anything about that, and they weren't going to hurt her or Caleb. She wondered how they would treat her if she wasn't the only person with the skills to keep their wheels rolling. She tried not to think about it.

Tris and Caleb walked around the back of the camp, staying out of everyone's way to get to the shack where Tris wrenched. Caleb helped her untie the bikes from the cart and clear a pathway into the shop, moving bikes as tall as he was out of the way to make room for the new ones from the dump. Then Tris released him to go play with the other children. He wasn't big enough or strong enough yet to carry bikes, and she wanted him to have as much of a childhood as possible.

She spent some time puttering around the shack, reorganizing the stacks of bikes into a new arrangement. It wasn't necessary, but she didn't want to go out and socialize until dinner was served. It made her feel something close to happiness, something like satisfaction, to watch her white hands get greasy and dirty with work. Her shop was the safest place to hide.

"Any luck today?" Andréa asked from behind her.

Tris turned and smiled. She didn't mind if Andréa was the one who interrupted her. The sun's setting rays warmed Andréa's dark brown skin, giving her life against the chilled mud of the shop walls. "Not really. Just some junkers I can strip for spare parts but that I'd never be able to get on the road again. I couldn't find the part for your dad's bike."

"That's too bad," Andréa said, checking behind her for observers before moving closer to Tris.

"If he would just let me fix up a new one for him, or zap strap a piece of cable housing to the frame, then he would have something to ride until I can find a part that will fix his bike," Tris said, her heart stuttering in her chest as Andréa closed the distance between them. They fell into a hug, almost as if it was accidental, and rested there, wrapped in each other's arms.

"I'm sorry he's so stubborn," Andréa said, not moving her head from where it was tucked into Tris's shoulder.

"That's not your fault," Tris said, squeezing Andréa tighter.

"I know," Andréa said with a sigh. "It's just—"

Tris glanced around quickly and then cut her off with a kiss. "Your father is your father, and not your responsibility. His problems are his own. Right?"

"Right," Andréa said. They'd been through all of this before, and Andréa had said it herself enough times that Tris knew she knew it. But knowing and feeling truth were two different things.

Still, Tris had a familiar moment of hesitation, and she considered asking Andréa to tell her dad about their relationship. Would it make life easier for her? Harder for Andréa? If they crossed her father, there was a high possibility that Tris and Caleb would be forced out of the camp and left alone in the cold. Not worth it, as always. She let the moment of discomfort pass.

"I think we might have to move the camp soon," Tris said, tucking a dreadlock behind Andréa's ear, enjoying the simple act of touching her. "The dump looks picked over."

"Really? We haven't been here for that long," Andréa said. "I don't want to move again if we don't have to."

"Me either, but someone had already been here for a while before we came and took most of the good stuff. My supplies from the last city raid are almost gone. It might be time, even if we don't want it to be."

"We can't keep doing this," Andréa said. "We're going to have to find somewhere to stay eventually. We can't live off of dumps forever. What about when Caleb is grown? If we don't adapt, we'll die. Eventually we won't be able to sustain ourselves."

"Could you bring it up at the next meeting?" Tris asked. Not only did she hate talking in public, but Andréa's voice held more respect in the community than her own.

"Of course," Andréa said, running her fingers down Tris's arm to take her hand. It was quiet in the camp, meaning that everyone was at dinner and they could now enjoy a moment of private

intimacy. Andréa kissed Tris, slow and tender, her hand cupping the back of Tris's head and weaving Tris's long red curls between her fingers. Some of the golden sunshine that kissed Andréa's back flowed through her lips into Tris's belly. She was filled with light and lightness, golden to the tips of her fingers and humming with Andréa's love.

Someone kicked a pebble outside, and they jumped apart. "Auntie Tris, are you coming for dinner?"

It was Caleb. Tris relaxed. It was okay if Caleb saw them kissing.

"Yeah," she said. "Are you hungry?"

"Starved!"

"All right, let's go then," Tris said.

She walked with Andréa and Caleb toward the only other building in their camp. Inside its walls they slept, ate, played games, and taught classes to the children of their group. Only Tris and her shop were separate. She was sure to keep a careful distance between herself and Andréa, but she allowed herself the indulgence of dreaming about a future where they didn't have to hide their relationship. Their kisses were far too infrequent, the moments of joy they shared fleeting and secret. Their relationship was an empty promise forged by trauma in the face of loneliness and desolation. They needed each other, and so they loved each other.

In her daydreams they could love openly and learn to hold each other up in times of prosperity, rather than just leaning hard on each other through the scarcity of their current landscape. Tris wanted to know what Andréa would look like as she came if she didn't have to swallow her moans, if they could take off all their clothes, if they could be luxurious with time and sharing pleasure.

She sighed, shaking the pictures from her head, and she walked into the building.

The hall was filled with the thirty-odd camp residents, all of them sitting around a gentle fire built for light over warmth. It was spring, and both the days and nights were warm. They ate soup from clay bowls and talked with their hands while they ate, but they fell silent when Tris entered with Caleb and Andréa. Caleb went to fetch their bowls from their sleeping area, while Tris sat and Andréa accepted a bowl of soup from her father, Jean.

"Any luck finding that piece for my bike, my boy?" Jean said.

"Tris isn't a boy, dad," Andréa said.

Tris waved her off, though her heart leaped. Andréa didn't always correct her father, but it made Tris feel so loved when she did.

Overall, Tris didn't think it was worth the fight, and she could handle small slights. "No sir. I'll keep looking, though."

"I hope you find it soon. All this walking is hard on my legs," Jean said.

"I'm happy to find you another bike while you wait, or to cobble something together so that your bike works. This piece is proving hard to find, and I don't want you inconvenienced."

"No, no. I want it done right. Just keep looking for it."

"Yes sir," Tris said, watching Andréa walk away with her father, face blank but sadness heavy in her eyes.

If she wasn't trans, or if her parents were still alive, maybe she could stand up to him and the rest of the people she lived with. They needed her: without her, they would ride their bikes, their main mode of transportation, into the ground. But she needed them just as much or more. Without them, she would have to provide enough for herself and Caleb to make it through the winter and to fight off the occasional zombie that had survived the carrion creatures and hunters of the woods. The skill swap was essential for their survival, so she was trapped here.

Caleb returned with the bowls and filled them up with soup, thanking the women and men who had cooked that evening with his cute dimpled smile. Danielle, a Chinese-French woman and the head chef, smiled at him. Everybody loved Caleb. Tris kissed him on the forehead and pulled him into the hollow between her crossed legs. He slurped up his soup from within the circle of her arms, and she ate around him. He was so tiny—malnourished, despite the community of support and everyone's best efforts. There was never enough of anything.

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It had been a week. Tris had picked through every inch of the dump and brought home every bike she could find, but still hadn't had any luck finding a clamp for Jean's bike. She was in her shop, stripping the rescued bikes for parts, when she heard a commotion outside.

She put down her allen key and walked out, wiping the grime off her hands onto her pants and gripping a hammer in her left hand. The people she lived with were spread out in a semi-circle around a young adult, early twenties and masculine, with brown skin and a trimmed black beard. He was pulling a heavily loaded trailer behind

him on his bike.

"Who are you?" Danielle demanded, her best and sharpest knife pointing at the newcomer's chest.

"My name is Darius," he said, hands pointed toward the sky in peace. "I don't mean you any harm. I saw you had a lot of bikes here, and wondered if you might trade me a few days' rest and some food for work on your bikes."

"You're a mechanic?" Danielle asked, and he nodded.

"We've already got a mechanic," Andréa said.

"But we're happy to shelter you for a few days and feed you," Jean said. "I'm sure there's something you could help us with. Always good to have another pair of hands." He shook the young man's hand warmly and clapped him on the back.

"That extra pair of hands also comes with an extra mouth," Andréa said, but no one was listening to her. They were all too busy showing the stranger around their home.

Tris watched all of this and said nothing. She had a sick feeling in her stomach: not because of Darius, but because of the way Jean had eagerly come forward to shake his hand.

She went back to her shop and smiled when they brought Darius around to see her.

"Tris," she said, offering her hand for a handshake.

Darius took it, one eyebrow raised. "Tris? Isn't that a girl's name?"

"I am a girl," Tris said. "It's just hard to get hormones when you're in the middle of the apocalypse. Welcome to my shop." She said it all in one breath, as if the faster she said it the less it would matter to him. Or the less it would matter to her that her facial hair was back, or that her body carried weight all wrong.

"Oh," he said, shaking his head and looking around the small space. "Sorry—that was rude. You've done an amazing job here. I don't have half the tools you do."

"We raid cities every now and again for supplies," Tris said. "I brought back all the tools. That's one of the nice things about having a semi-permanent location. I have the space to hold on to all the specialty tools, and I don't have to carry them with me everywhere I go."

"There are lots of good things about having a place to call home," Darius said.

Tris smiled, though she wanted to punch him. If he wanted a permanent home here, then she would be forced out before the week was up. "Why are you on your own?" she asked. "I'm impressed you've managed this long all by yourself."

"It's not easy. But—I'm sure you know this—everyone wants a mechanic. That means that whenever I find a group of people, I can stock up on supplies. I like being on the road. I haven't really found anyplace I want to settle, you know?"

"Sort of," Tris said, not wanting to agree with him, because she didn't, and not wanting to give him any personal information.

"Look, do you need a hand with anything?" he asked. "I'd be happy to help."

"Sure? I'm just stripping and sorting the bikes I pulled from the dump. I was hoping to find a clamp to fix the brakes on this bike here, but I've pulled out the last of the bikes from the dump and haven't found it." She pointed to Jean's bike.

Darius looked it over. "You know what? I think I've got just the thing."

"What? Really?"
"Yeah! I found one like a week ago, and I kept it because I knew it would be practically impossible to find one again. Let me go grab my stuff." Darius pulled over his trailer and flung parts and tools everywhere in his search. Tris didn't mind the mess he was making in her shop; she was too excited. "Ah ha! Found it!"

"No way! Jean's going to be so happy."
They worked together, fiddling with the clamp and coming up with creative solutions until the brakes were functional again. It was nice to work with someone else, and Darius understood the language of bikes. They bumped into each other occasionally because neither Tris or Darius were used to sharing space or working with another set of hands on the same bike, but it wasn't a problem. Every time they bumped arms or got in each other's way, they just smiled and moved around each other.

An hour later, Jean's bike was fully tuned from front tire to rear fender. They couldn't wait to show him.

"Jean! Where are you!" Tris called out as Darius wheeled the bike out of the shop. Jean emerged from the community building, tucking something into his pocket.

"Guess what? Darius had the piece for your bike with him and we fixed it! You can ride your bike again!"

"Really? That's amazing!" he said, walking over to Darius and clapping him on the back. "I knew we did the right thing bringing you into our village." He steered Darius toward the building. "Look everyone, Darius fixed my bike."

Darius looked back at Tris over his shoulder, eyebrows raised

and drawn together in disbelief. Tris wasn't surprised at all that Jean didn't recognize her work. He had always hated her, and now there was a cis boy he could heap praise onto without feeling uncomfortable.

"I'm going to take it for a spin," Jean said, swinging his leg over the saddle. "Thank you so much, son." Tris took a step back. She had never heard Jean thank anyone for anything before.

"What was that?" Darius asked her, as they watched Jean pedal away.

"He doesn't like me very much."

"No kidding," Darius said. "What's his problem?"

"He doesn't like that I'm trans," Tris said, voice flat and gaze fixed on Jean's retreating back.

"Not cool," Darius said with feeling. Tris looked at him, surprised by his reaction. "It's not your fault you're trans. If he's got a problem with it, then it's his problem. He should keep it to himself."

"Thank you," said Tris. "Not many people have been supportive of me since, you know, zombies and all."

"Why do you stay here?" he asked.

"It's my home," Tris said with a shrug. "It's safest for Caleb."

Darius examined her face. "But there's someone else? Someone you don't want to leave."

Tris sighed. "Her name is Andréa. She's Jean's daughter." She laughed at the look on Darius's face. "Yeah, it's a little complicated. We keep it a secret. Don't tell anyone, alright?"

"I promise," Darius said, shaking her white hand stained black with dirt. Tris smiled, relaxed in her shoulders and chest. It was nice to trust someone. She hoped he lived up to it.

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Darius had been with them for a week, and the people of the camp loved him. They were constantly bringing him little gifts: treasures they found, rare treats. Darius accepted them graciously and then shared with Tris and Caleb. She noticed that people had stopped bringing her their bikes to fix, and they would go to Darius for help. They shared the workload, but Tris knew that the village was trying to edge her out while convincing Darius to stay. She wasn't the only one who noticed.

Andréa commented when she brought lunch for Tris and Darius. "They're trying to replace you," she said, glaring at Darius.

"It's not his fault," Tris said, accepting the bowl of salad.

"Don't let them," Andréa said. "I don't want you to leave."

"I'm not going anywhere. I promise," Tris said, setting down her salad on the bench and taking Andréa into her arms. Darius kept an eye on the door for them while he shoveled food into his mouth. Both Andréa and Tris were enjoying being open about their relationship to another adult, even though Andréa would rather that adult wasn't Darius. "This is my home," Tris said, kissing Andréa on the cheek.

"She's right, though," Darius said. "They are trying to ice you out."

"They can all mind their own business," Tris said. "This is my home. I'm not leaving."

"Good," Andréa said, pulling her close. "Because this is right where I want you." She kissed Tris fiercely.

Danielle walked in while they were still kissing. "Darius, my bike is making a noise. Could you, oh." She stopped just two steps into the shop and stared at the girls. "I'll just, uh, come back later," she said, hastily backing her bike out of the door and hitting herself in the shin with the crank.

"Frakk." Andréa said, running out the door. "Danielle, wait. You can't tell anyone," she said, and then Tris couldn't hear any more of the conversation as they walked away.

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Danielle came back an hour later, pretending that nothing had happened. But there was an awful lot of whispering at the dinner that night, and tension snuck back into Tris's shoulders.

The next day, Tris was glared at constantly. She made it to noon before she stormed to the community building and started to throw all of her and Caleb's belongings into bags.

She could read the signs. She wasn't wanted here anymore.

"Everyone's glaring at me," Andréa said from behind her, sad. "Wait, what are you doing?"

"Leaving," Tris said, wrapping their bowls in a dishcloth and tucking them into her bag.

"But you promised," Andréa said. "You promised you would stay."

Tris stopped packing and looked at her love, ferocity draining out of her. "I know I did, but it isn't safe here anymore. Not for me, not for Caleb, and maybe not even for you. There's got to be somewhere better. Come with me?"

Andréa took a small step back, shaking her head. “I don’t know if I can,” she said. “My dad—I know he’s terrible, but I love him and he needs me. He’s the only family I have left.”

Tris’s heart banged, as if Andréa had stuck a knife in it. “Think about it? Please. You’re the only part of this place I don’t want to leave behind.”

Andréa nodded, and then she fled the community building.



Tris finished packing and went in search of her bike trailer. It was in communal use until the camp needed to move again, but she was going to take it. She’d adapted the trailer so that it was extra long, giving Caleb had a place to sit. It would still fit him, although he’d be more cramped now than when he was four.

The trailer was being used to haul vegetables from the garden. She uncoupled it from the bike it was hooked to and wheeled it over to the shop. There, she threw all of her basic tools into a tool roll. She eyed the fancy tools she’d stolen from the city, ones that she only needed rarely but that were invaluable when she did need them. They had been hard to find, but they would be heavy while she was on the road. She took the tools for seized bottom brackets and left everything else.

She spun around the shop, selecting a handful of oddball parts that were hard to find, cables, chain oil, and a mixed bag of brake pads. She threw everything into a cracked Rubbermaid container. Later, once she and Caleb were far away from the run-down sham of a village they’d lived in, she would organize everything.

She attached the trailer to her bike and went in search of Caleb. She found him climbing trees with the other two children of the camp and called him down.

“No. I want to keep playing,” Caleb said.

“I’m sorry. You’ll have time to play later, I promise,” Tris said. “But this is important and urgent.”

“Okay,” Caleb said, grumpy but compliant. He jumped down and took her hand. Tris remembered to breathe. She was doing the right thing. This little person was in her care.

“Are we leaving?” Caleb asked when they got to the bike and trailer.

“Yes. Is that okay?” Tris asked.

Caleb took a moment to think about it. “Yeah,” he said, climbing

into his seat on the trailer. “We’re going on an adventure.” He was so matter of fact about it and so decidedly serious that Tris smiled against her constricted chest.

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There was an audience waiting for them as they wheeled out of the shop. It wasn’t the whole village, but there were at least ten people there, faces like stone.

“So you’re finally leaving,” Jean said, arms crossed over his chest at the head of the assembled group.

“Yes,” Tris said, adrenaline pumping through her body. Could she cycle faster than them? Not with the trailer and Caleb in tow. She could outrun them, but that would mean leaving Caleb and everything for her future survival behind.

“You can’t take that stuff with you,” Danielle said, pointing to the trailer and the container of bike parts.

“It’s mine,” Tris said, fear thinning her voice.

Andréa walked up behind the mob. “Let her have it. It’s hers,

and we can’t use it anyways.”

“He can’t take them!” Jean said. “Darius can use the tools.”

“Dad, please!” Andréa said.

“I can’t believe you let that freak touch you,” Jean said.

Tris was panicking. This was going from bad to worse. She picked up Caleb and swung him onto her back, ready to run and leave her things behind. Survival now was more important than survival later.

But then Darius biked up beside her, his trailer fully loaded.

“She’s not a freak,” he said. “You’re a bully.”

Everyone froze.

“What are you doing?” Jean said after a long pause, anger deadening his voice.

“I’m going with her,” Darius said. “And you’re going to let us leave.”

“You are?” Tris asked.

“I’m surprised you didn’t ask,” Darius said. “This place is terrible.”

His declaration fractured the mob into a group of ashamed people who shuffled away from each other and then dispersed. Andréa tried to go to Tris, but her dad pulled her away. She didn’t fight him. Tris double checked that the straps on the trailer were firmly secured as she waited for her hands to stop shaking. When she could control her breathing again, she let Caleb climb down from her back and

helped him get settled onto his seat.

When the crowd was gone and quiet had taken hold, Tris smiled at Darius. “Thank you,” she said. “I didn’t know if I was going to make it out of that alive. You don’t have to come with me, you know. I’ll be okay on my own.”

“I know you will be,” Darius said. “But I don’t want to stay here with people like this.”

Tris looked towards the community center and its doorway, glowing with the light of the fire inside. If she looked hard enough, maybe she could see Andréa to say goodbye.

“I’m sorry she’s not coming,” Darius said quietly.

“Me too,” said Tris. And then she made herself turn away and swing her leg over the saddle. She flicked her kickstand up with her heel, and she squared her shoulders toward the dirt path. “But it’s time to go.”

A NIGHT IN EARLY DECEMBER

HAL SCHRIEVE

THE DAY I GOT back from Thanksgiving break, my mom drove me up just to Tacoma and then dropped me off at the bus station there. Across the parking lot was the doughnut place where I'd taken my friend Ursula in August when they were waiting for their train, just before they moved to Eugene. Over Thanksgiving I'd had a big fight with Ursula because they texted me saying they were back in Olympia on a visit and asked me to move the stuff they still had at my house over to another friend's house they were staying at. They didn't ask if we could hang out, even though they were in town for a few days. Ursula and I had been friends for so long that it felt weird to be angry at them, but I'd discovered that I could be angry anyway, and I'd said some mean shit, and now we were probably not going to be friends any longer. Looking at the doughnut place, I remembered how in August I had felt like it was worth it to drive them all the way to the train station to say a real goodbye.

The bus took like an hour and a half, which is three times as long as it takes in a car to get from Tacoma to Seattle, but I get it because my mom didn't want to deal with traffic. I got out of the bus, clutching my red wool coat around my hands. It was freezing; below freezing, probably. It had been in the high thirties at noon. The sky had grown dark, and with the darkness came this really icy wind. I walked back to my dorm in the cold, a distance of maybe twenty blocks, with my hands under my armpits and my huge backpack on my back. On the Ave there were the homeless kids who always stood outside in front of the now-empty pizza place, set up with their stuff and their dog. One of them had buzzed her head since

I'd last passed them. They weren't paying attention to me; they were talking to each other and smoking a joint, which was a relief because I had like one nickel in my purse and I hate telling people I can't give them money. I worried about the dog.

I was in a triple. My dorm only had triples for the people who selected "gender neutral housing" on their little form things before freshman year. In theory there was a forum on a dot edu site where trans or gay people could go and find people to be roommates with and you could enter in one another's names, but nobody had posted on it since 2012, so in August I checked the box and just took my chances. I got put with a straight boy and a straight girl. The straight boy checked the "gender neutral housing" box for reasons that were totally obscure. The straight girl's best friend was a lesbian back in Arizona, which is why she had checked the box. She was a wiccan, had fairy statues, and liked Korean pop, and I got along with her pretty well; we sat up one night eating a pint of ice cream together and talking about eating disorders. But she moved out just before Thanksgiving to move in with her friend. Now there was a new dude, who was friends with the straight boy.

When I opened the door to my dorm, the first straight boy was playing a computer game without his headphones in. I said hi, and he grunted. I thought about stealing a weed brownie from under my other roommate's bed because I knew where he kept them and he wasn't back yet, but they sell those things in packs of six, and I knew they were expensive, and the guy probably knew exactly how many he had.

I opened up my computer and went on Craigslist. The anthologies and memoirs I'd read in high school in 2012 about radical queer sex sometimes advocated totally indiscriminate, anonymous sex as a method of resistance against the paranoia and oversanitized, overmechanized cruising strategies developed in the wake of the AIDS pandemic, strategies that dehumanized people and cut away the potential of real intimacy. At least I think that's what they said. I lent the anthologies out to friends and never saw them again, so I hadn't reread them in a while. I had also given up sex positivity. I checked the "m4t" section of Craigslist maybe once a week, as a joke, because all of the men who posted were so nasty. Then, as a joke, I hooked up with them.

I was lonely. My best friend Vivian was like two thousand miles away or something and was rapidly becoming an alcoholic. He only called me to talk about how he was going to kill himself or mumble

the lyrics to “Eleanor Rigby” at me at three in the morning. Once every so often, he would tell me he loved me and that I was the only person in the world who cared about him. Then he would ask: could I send him money?

After a while I figured out that I could just enter “ftm” into the search bar of the personals and not have to see all the transmisogynists who said disgusting things about trans women in their little headlines. Instead I could just look at the posts by men who fetishized trans men. Most of them were dudes who were into trans men like some racist white men are into Asian twinks, with this ambivalently sinister thing about liking hairlessness and submissiveness that’s implied but not stated outright. There were a few posts by people looking to have sex parties and inviting trans men to join, and a few posts by butch lesbians in their 50s who wanted to dom younger butches and figured trans men were part of that category nowadays.

There was one guy who literally posted every three days, like, posted the same ad over and over again, like he was a robot. *GAY MAN SEEKS FTM 7.5" UNCUT CAPITOL HILL*, the text read. If you looked at the ad, it was about how he wanted to hook up with a young hairless trans man. The picture was one of those unflattering dick pics where it’s taken from about the height of the guy’s chin and it just looks like this dick has feet. You couldn’t make out whether the cock was good or not; it just looked like a white sausage of indeterminate size. I thought it was funny when I had looked at it before, and I clicked on it again now to laugh at it. But then I thought: hey, this loser is probably just about as lonely as I am right now.

I emailed the address on the ad, and I got a response within just a few minutes. He sent me a number and told me to text nudes to him. Whatever. I went in the bathroom and sent him four or five pictures. The cramped dorm bathroom with its high mirror was not the best place to take nudes. But he sent a text with his address.

I put on gloves and a hat before I left, thinking about how my hands had hurt earlier. There was sparkly silver thread in these gloves, and I felt like they were sort of cute. I stuffed condoms from my sock drawer in my pockets. I felt a fringe of nervousness prickle my neck as my roommate watched me leave. I figured if I got murdered and did not come back he wouldn’t even say anything about it to anyone for about a week, and probably wouldn’t really notice I wasn’t around. I considered telling someone where I was

going to be, but I didn't know who I would tell. I opened up my phone and texted Vivian:

O: I'm going to go hookup with an old dude wish me luck .

It took a second, and he texted back:

take care darling :OOO

It was even colder and darker out now. I walked out of my industrial gray miserable pit of a dorm building, and my feet crunched on leaves that had gotten frozen in the icy wind earlier that day. My toes were numb in under a minute. My shoes were those classic Doc Martens that make you look like either an art student or a skinhead, and I hated them, but I'd bought them when I was sixteen and had to live with it. By the time I tripped up to 45th and 15th, I felt like I was only half alive, and the other half of me had already dropped well below room temperature into an abyss of prematurely arthritic joint pain. I'd lost like, ten pounds in the month before Thanksgiving, and it meant my knees hurt a lot for some reason.

I looked up the directions to the address on Google Maps, my fingers barely working, but then the guy from the ad started texting me directions that slightly contradicted the route Google said to take, and I thought: whatever, probably he knows his own house. It was the 49 bus, and for once I was grateful that in winter all the bus drivers decided to turn their buses into sweaty toaster ovens with the heaters blasting full tilt all day every day. My nose and face were cold, and I pulled at my gloves.

I'd said I'd be there at eleven, and I got to the intersection where the guy had said to wait for further instructions at ten. It felt weird to text him. I didn't want to seem too eager, and I wasn't especially eager anyway, so I hesitated at the bus stop and looked around. It was quiet on this part of the hill, with just retail shops and no bars. The bar part was further up. I was standing on the corner, and the cold was back inside my skin. In the distance were the cranes that seemed to be everywhere in Seattle nowadays.

There was a Starbucks there, so I went in. It was bright and warm inside, and it was one of those locations where they had really spruced things up because rich people lived in the area. There were couches and things. There was a painting on the wall that some local artist had done of a woman being abducted by a spaceship. I envied her.

I loitered around the counter. I hadn't had the chestnut praline latte or whatever, and actually I hadn't eaten since lunch that day, so I bought one, counting the calories in my head again and adding

up the total and then recalculating and adding an extra fifty just in case they'd added more whipped cream than normal. My hands were shaking, and I also probably looked a little shady, a little shipwrecked. I thought again about how nobody knew where I was. The latte tasted vaguely of piss, but they say it takes one to know one.

The guy texted me again. Now he told me to walk down this alley across the road from the Starbucks and then press the buzzer and enter the apartment number. I finished my latte and went to the bathroom, figuring I didn't want to wet my pants when I got killed.

The alley was behind this antique store and was littered with needles and broken glass. It crunched under my feet, and I sort of wished I was the kind of person who did drugs, or maybe one drug, so I would feel spacy and cool and not just totally grim about the whole situation I was in and the fact that even though I knew I could totally turn around and not hook up with this person, I was absolutely going to hook up with him anyway.

The address he gave me turned out to be a massive concrete apartment complex not very different from the 1960s dorm I lived in. I was entering through the back door, which was made out of glass and which opened on a dull gray carpeted interior hall lined with little gray mailboxes. There were two guys sitting by the back door with skateboards who looked at me for a second and then turned away again. I buzzed the buzzer and said hi, I'm here because you told me to buzz this number, and the indistinct voice said yeah, okay, and the door opened. I went into the interior hall and waited next to the elevator. It took about five more minutes, and I looked at my phone again. No new texts or messages, obviously.

The elevator door opened and there was this person standing there: short, in sweats, with a knit hat on, dumpy with an unkempt beard. I wished that I was good enough for someone to dress up for me. Oh well, I thought.

Then the queen opened her mouth and I knew—well, it was this wash of comfort, hearing her voice in person.

Saying *she* is political in a different way than it used to be, since people think you are talking about a womanhood which is specific and positive, instead of this timeless and very universal thing where you are Outside and In the Dark and your voice betrays you and your body and desire confounds those around you. I think radical faeries still call each other *she*, and so do people who do drag, but a lot of other fags stopped at some point, which is annoying, because *she* is a powerful word, a boundless identifier. My hot take is that

you can use *she* to talk about a woman or a fag, though not any fag. Not all fags are she. You know her when she appears, and you feel you might love her or might be really disappointed by her, but your heart pounds for her a little bit just because she is there. Listen, I don't know what I'm saying exactly, but it's like—

"I'm so glad you could make it," she said with that narrow high-pitched lilt.

Suddenly I felt less sure that this was going to be a night of self-destruction. She felt like a parent suddenly, even though I knew nothing else about her, except that she had posted that ad. Whatever. She has an all right ass, I thought, as she walked ahead of me to the door of her apartment. The door had a little wooden snowman on it, hanging on a tack.

Inside the apartment there was a cat.

"That's Amadeus," she said.

It was a small cat with a brown striped coat. I petted it. "It's nice," I said. I felt at home. I felt like I had come into someone's home, and it was a home rather than some kind of pad for a tryst. There were bills on the counter, and there was a little table by the window overlooking the alley with a jam jar full of pens. Over the table hung a picture of Cher.

"Can I ask," she said, "what made you answer the ad?"

"I guess it's hard to know when someone wants you," I said, "and it's easier if I know I'm what someone is looking for. I've seen that ad probably eight times, and it just felt like—well, this is simpler than going through a whole conversation on Grindr only for them to say no, I want someone with a dick. Or with a dick not like your dick."

"Mm," she said. "I know how that is." But she did not explain this statement. "I hope I'm not disappointing." Which obviously wasn't a sexy thing to say, but she didn't really know how to be sexy or she wouldn't have posted a damn Craigslist ad. Also, you could tell from the apartment and everything that she was depressed.

"I have to go to the bathroom," I said.

In the bathroom there was a basket full of seashells sitting on the back of the toilet. There was also a large velvet painting of Jesus hanging on the wall.

"There's a picture of Jesus in your bathroom," I said, when I came out of the bathroom in my underwear. "I like it."

"Oh god, yeah," said the queen. "I got it at Goodwill, and you know you just see something like that and you scream, I have to have it. It's so tacky. It's my favorite possession. I'm not religious

or anything.”

“It’s good,” I said. I wished it was religious.

Without taking any of her clothes off or removing her hat, she embraced me. We kissed awkwardly. We were the same height. I touched her chest through her shirt—her soft rounded breasts, and her belly. But this made her nervous, and she reached up and took my hands in hers. Her hands were very soft. She pushed me down on the bed with her on top of me. I was ready to be languid. I wanted to hold her, to hold anyone really, but her body was heavy and soft and hairy, and I liked having her on top of me. Her hands fumbled at my waistband and reached beneath it to tousle with my cock.

“Your clit is so big,” she murmured to me. Her beard scraped my face. She had clearly been getting herself worked up before I got there. I could practically feel her heart pounding. It was only a few minutes and a small amount of fumbling before she murmured, “I’m going to fuck you now.”

When she pulled down her sweatpants and threw them off the bed into the corner, I reminded her nervously to use a condom, because she seemed about to go right for it.

“Don’t worry,” she said. But she seemed worried, too, worried that I was unsettled or uncomfortable. She kept running her hands over my belly and my chest and my scars. She was still wearing her T-shirt and her hat.

I could faintly feel her sliding in and out of me, and in a distant kind of way it was not unpleasant, but neither did it fill me with joy. It was mostly a vague warmth. Later lovers have told me that I’m a size queen, and perhaps this is true. Who really knows why anyone is the way they are, or why they can’t get off when a depressed queen is trying very earnestly to fuck them with what ought to be an adequate penis? I tried to concentrate on her soft hands, which were still rubbing and pressing against my chest, reaching up to touch my face. She had delicate glossy nails. I kept my eyes open and looked around at the room as she fucked me. She was moaning, and I was making sympathetic little noises.

In her bedroom, the walls were covered with shelves, and the shelves were wholly occupied with Styrofoam heads bearing wigs. It was dark except for the light of the TV over the bed. The TV was turned to a Netflix documentary about transgender children and adolescents. It had been paused about halfway through and was hovering there suspended, casting a light over us. I recognized it because it had played at a transgender convention my mother had

taken me to when I was fifteen. I wondered if she had been jerking off to it, and I decided she probably had. I decided I didn't really want to think about that.

She pushed my legs above my head, and I felt a little more suddenly. Then I rolled over on top of her and rode her dick and kissed her mouth again, appreciating that as depressed as she was, she had still managed to rinse her mouth with Listerine in preparation for my visit. For a minute I had real pleasure, but then she was spent and rolled out from beneath me.

"You're so hot," she said to me. "Some of the boys I've fucked, they're so hairy. That's not what I'm into. But you're also such a boy, and you're obviously on testosterone. But delicate, still."

"Oh," I said. "Well, in a few years, I'm sure I'll get hairier. And I mean, that's sort of the idea of being on testosterone. To stop being—well. I'll still be delicate when I'm hairy. I'm a fag."

She laughed nervously. "I like the way you look now. It's just a preference thing."

"I suppose so," I said. I looked at the television and away again.

"Sorry I'm so fat," she said. "I gained ten pounds this year, and I'm trying to get back on the wagon."

"You're fine," I said. "You're not a tiny twink or whatever, but you're appealing in your own way." Which was true. "I like your hands. I like your nails."

"Oh," she said, sounding alarmed.

"I think it's funny you kept your hat on," I said.

There was silence for a second.

"You're sweet," she said to me. "A lot of boys are just looking to get fucked and they go. One time a kid stole a hundred dollars out of my wallet, and I didn't realize until the next day."

"I won't steal anything," I said.

She reached out and touched my arm. "You said you were eighteen?" she asked.

"Yes," I said. "I go to the university."

"You look so young," she said.

"Yes," I said. "It's sort of a trans boy thing."

"You must have started transitioning when you were really young," she said. "I'm honestly really jealous of it. You knew what you wanted and went for it."

"I mean," I said, because I had been having a gender crisis for eight weeks after rereading *Orlando* again. "I guess. It's mostly that I felt I had to do something when I was a teenager because I knew

my parents were the type to support me if I kept at them for long enough, and I knew I wouldn't be able to make them understand it if I waited until I got out of the house."

"It's really brave," she said. "And so important. Especially more for transgender girls, because they have to stop all the hair growing on their face. If you wait, you have to get FFS," she continued, and she really said it like that, FFS, "and you have hair everywhere, and you have to get electrolysis. If you start when you're younger, it's easier."

"It's all right, you know, to look like a trans person," I said. "There are trans women who are very beautiful who transition really late."

"No, they don't look as good as girls who transition at thirteen or whatever," she said. "With boys it's different. Though I don't like the hairy forty-year-old trans men with big hips. That's just messed up."

"You sure know a lot about that," I said.

"I mean, it's so interesting," she said.

There was another prolonged silence.

"Why are you interested in trans boys?" I asked, because I liked asking people who fetishized me this question, but also because I felt like she wasn't saying something.

"It's just something I'm into." She paused again, longer this time, and she ran her hand down my arm again. "Can I tell you something?"

"Sure," I said.

"I've actually—I know something about transgender things because I tried it," she said.

"Tried what?"

"To transition," she said. "I've been on estrogen two years, and I got all my name and sex stuff changed. All my licenses and passport stuff say female. But I gave it up last month. It won't work for me."

"Why won't it work?" I asked. I was reeling a little bit. Though again, it wasn't entirely a surprise.

"I don't know," she said. "I just stopped shaving. I never got electrolysis. I still do girl mode at work and shave for that on weekends, because I work—do you know?" She named a bar on the Hill.

"Yes," I said. I hadn't been, then, although I'd heard the name.

"I'm a female impersonator there. But I stopped dressing like that all the time." She took off her hat. Her hair went down past her shoulders. "I just stopped feeling like it was possible. It's so much work."

"I mean, it's work to do anything," I said. I shrugged. "And women don't have to wear makeup and full femme drag to be women. That's

like, true for trans women too.”

“Then maybe it’s something else.” She shrugged. “Something with me.”

“I think it’s funny that you posted an ad as a man into trans boys,” I said. “If you’re, you know. If you’re kind of a trans woman. Which it seems like you are.” I knew why someone might do that, but I wanted to hear it from her, to figure out what things looked like to her.

“I mean, nobody wants to hook up with a trans woman except straight men,” she said. “And trans men do not want any of that shit. It’s *cisgender men* only.” She said this last phrase like it was a bizarre neologism that she was making fun of.

“That’s—well, I guess I’ve heard that,” I said. “I’ve heard a lot of trans women talk about that. It’s fucked up.”

“I don’t usually tell the people I fuck,” she said. “It’s too complicated.”

“Not the trans boys?” I asked, thinking, surely they guess.

“No,” she said. “Anyway, I’m not a real woman. I started too late. And it doesn’t make any sense, gender, anyway.”

“Gender doesn’t make a lot of sense,” I agreed. “But you can transition anyway.”

“They say that,” she said. “I don’t like the trans girls I meet at work. There’s all these Puerto Ricans, and they all yell shit all the time and are really loud, and they have motorcycle boyfriends and live these really dangerous lives, and they’re just such—excuse me for being politically incorrect—Latina bitches,” she said.

“Oh,” I said. I looked at the ceiling and thought about what to say to that. *You’re racist?* But I wanted to extract more information from her, and I also wanted to leave without fighting with her, and anyway I wasn’t sure that I knew enough about what she meant to try to contradict her. Nobody wants to hear two transsexuals fight in the middle of the night through the floor. And I was a white man, and she was a white woman, and we were both probably racist when you got down to it, only there was misogyny making my word invalidate hers, or something. There was a power dynamic. Maybe there were several. I didn’t know what they were.

“And you know more about what you want than I do,” she said.

“I don’t think that’s true,” I said.

I got dressed. As I put my coat on, she asked, “Do you want to see what I look like when I’m cute?”

“You’re cute now,” I said. “But sure.”

She pulled up a Facebook album on her phone and showed me pictures of herself in full makeup and a corset and a 1980s prom dress, onstage at some function. “Another reason I didn’t want to tell you about the drag stuff,” she said, “is because I’m pretty well known around here in drag scenes, and I don’t want people to gossip about me.”

“I won’t gossip,” I said. “You look good in the photos.”

I kissed her and then petted Amadeus on my way out. When I left, I realized that I had left my silver gloves sitting under her chair. I kept walking. My toes turned numb almost instantly in the freezing cold night, especially standing at the bus stop. Two straight couples, drunk, stood near me complaining about the weather. I looked up at the sky. It was dark with pinpricks of light.

She texted me some time later that my gloves were at her house. The message surprised me because it came so late. I had not forgotten her, but the night had been buried under new calamities: two friends were homeless, Vivian was in the hospital again, and I had gained three pounds.

Oh, haha, I said. *I didn’t realize you had them.* I wondered if it had taken so long to find them because she hadn’t cleaned her room.

I do have them, she wrote. *Come over.*

I sat for a moment in the dorm room with the six empty cans of Diet Red Bull on the floor around the trash can, picking at the hangnail on my thumb and studying her text. I thought about what would happen if I went to her. I worried that I would smell her breath or her cum or her sweat and compare our skin and hair and teeth in the dark of the overheated apartment. The thought of being so close to another living body was something unbearable.

I didn’t reply.

DINNER PARTY

ERIC EMILY SATCHWILL

IT'S JUST A DINNER party, Cecilia told herself as she hooked the silver earrings into her lobes. It seemed like a lifetime ago that Walden had gotten them for her, back when she'd still lived in the World. They'd been shopping for information at the faerie-run Market, not jewelry, but he'd bought them for her when he'd noticed her looking all the same.

She smoothed her hands down the front of her dark red cocktail dress. "What do you think?" she asked Walden. "It doesn't make me look too pale, does it?"

"It looks stunning on you," he replied. "Just as the last five dresses did."

Cecilia wasn't sure she believed him—he only ever wore the same brown suits, after all—and she was sure the red clashed with the pink frames of her glasses. But he was right that she was running out of options for the evening.

She tugged at her mousy ponytail. "Maybe I should try a styling spell."

Walden came up behind her and put his hands on her shoulders. "You are beautiful," he said, kissing her neck. "And if you continue to fuss with your flawlessness, we will be even more late than we already are."

Cecilia bit her lip. "What if I just—"

He turned her to face him and looked at her over gold-rimmed glasses. "Cecilia."

She sighed. "Okay, okay. You win," she said, rolling her eyes only a little.

She slipped her arms around his waist. He smiled at her, his red-amber eyes bright in his dark brown face. He cupped her cheek and kissed her again, the touch of his lips against hers sending a thrill through her right to her toes.

This she couldn't believe. Learning magic, getting caught up in a daemon civil war, even moving to the Realm after: none of it came close to the impossibility of kissing this man. This man who knew her—all of her—and still wanted her.

"Shall we?" he asked.

Cecilia nodded, a little breathless. "Lead the way."

Arm in arm with Walden, she followed the pattern of turns that would bring them to their hosts' household. She always found the gray, featureless passages between the households of the Realm a little spooky, but she had to admit that taking the same route home no matter where you left from made navigation a lot easier.

Christopher greeted them at the door with a smile. A little taller than Cecilia, the man made the pale skin, light-brown hair combo that was boring on her seem fresh and beautiful.

"Welcome," he said, hugging them both as they went inside. "I'm glad you two could make it at least. I was beginning to think that it would be only Adalira and myself."

"I thought my sister would be joining us," said Walden.

"Unfortunately, Beatricia had some unexpected business to attend to," Christopher replied. "And the few others who were available in the first place made similar excuses."

"A pity," said Walden. "It has been a while since we've had a proper social gathering in the Realm."

Christopher shrugged, lips pressed together. "Rebuilding takes time."

"Hey, at least we're still here to do the rebuilding," said Cecilia, giving Christopher's shoulder a squeeze. She and Walden might have been there for the final battle of the civil war, but Christopher had been leading on the front lines from the beginning. She could only imagine the toll that had taken on him. "That's something to celebrate, right?"

He smiled again, though it didn't quite reach his eyes. "Of course. And speaking of celebrating, Adalira is waiting in the drawing room."

They followed Christopher down the hall. Adalira was lounging on a brocade couch in the drawing room, glass of wine in one hand and a book in the other—another Star Wars novel, judging by the

familiar logo on the cover. Without even trying, the woman was gorgeous: dark hair, bronze skin, she was full Latina beauty dressed in classic Jackie Kennedy fashion and wearing it better than the First Lady ever had.

Adalira looked up with a smile, and Cecilia's heart did a flip as their eyes met. Then Adalira's red-amber gaze slid away, hiding a flash of something that Cecilia was afraid to define.

"It's about time you got here," Adalira said, coming over to give Walden a hug.

"We thought we would try being fashionably late," he replied.

"What he means is that we're late because I was trying to be fashionable," Cecilia joked, flicking out the skirt of her dress. "Not sure I pulled it off."

"You look fine," Adalira said, hugging Cecilia in turn. For a moment, Cecilia expected her to go in for a kiss on the cheek, but then Adalira stepped back quickly, tucking a lock of hair behind her ear. She turned to her partner. "Christopher, is dinner ready?"

"Ready and waiting to be served," Christopher replied with an elegant bow of his head.

"Good. I'm ready to eat, and I imagine our guests are hungry, too," said Adalira, smiling at Walden, not looking at Cecilia.

Walden put his hand on Cecilia's waist as they moved to the dining room, but for once she didn't feel the usual giddy warmth at his touch. *You look fine.* A ball of lead settled in her stomach. What did Adalira have against her? They'd gotten along well enough talking in the network in the early days of the resistance—more than well enough. If Cecilia didn't know any better, she'd have said there was flirting going on. But ever since meeting for the first time face to face . . .

Maybe she thinks of me as a rival? Cecilia thought. But that didn't make sense; she knew Adalira and Christopher weren't exclusive. Theoretically, neither were she and Walden, although Cecilia was only just beginning to believe that there was even one person in the Three Lands who could love her. So why did it seem like every time they saw each other, Adalira wanted Cecilia as far away from her as possible? She didn't want to entertain the only other answer her mind had to offer. The Realm was supposed to be a fresh start, a place where the old fears and bigoted attitudes of the World wouldn't follow her.

"I hear you're taking over the network and plan to make it public," Christopher said when he'd finished serving the first course,

distracting Cecilia from her reverie.

"I'm not taking over as such," Cecilia replied. "I don't have that kind of power. It'll take a team of humans and daemons to get it set up properly, to run maintenance and all that. But I am the senior director—or I will be, if the Realm government ever approves the project."

"They almost certainly will," said Christopher. "Message spells are all well and good, but the usefulness of the network cannot be denied. And who better to oversee its construction than the woman who hacked into the original?"

Cecilia couldn't help but grin. "I hope so. Otherwise I'll have to actually look for a job so that I can immigrate properly. It'd be awkward going back to the World after all this."

"You aren't going anywhere," Adalira said, a bitter edge to her voice. "Those thrice-damned fools who call themselves my colleagues wouldn't have the gall to deport a war hero. And if they can't see that because you're only human, maybe they should return to the World instead." She cleared her throat and took a long drink of wine. "Walden, how is your conservatory coming along?"

Walden gave Cecilia a look, a silent *are you all right?* that she answered with a smile. She wasn't—she didn't even know what to make of that outburst—but she could pretend, reassure him. He squeezed her knee before turning to Adalira. "It's recovering. I've had to completely replace all the plants, but the new ones are surviving, for the most part."

They continued like that through dinner, although Cecilia couldn't help but notice that Adalira only talked to Walden for the rest of the meal. At least Christopher was willing to keep up a conversation with her, and there were even a few moments where he made her forget how out of place she still felt.

"Why don't we head back to the drawing room for drinks?" Adalira suggested once Christopher had cleared the dessert dishes. "We could play a card game. Unless you and Walden don't think you can hold your own against me and Cecilia in a bridge match."

And just like that, all the panic came crashing back. "Um, we should probably get going. Walden has that meeting in the morning; isn't that right?"

Walden twitched an eyebrow—he didn't have any obligations the next day, and he knew she knew it. "Quite right," he said, taking Cecilia's hand. "Thank you for the offer, but it is getting late."

"Oh." Adalira glanced at Cecilia and looked away quickly. She

smiled, then, and said, "We're still on for dinner at your household next week, of course."

"Absolutely," Walden replied, and Cecilia nodded as though she really was looking forward to it. "Barring any unforeseen circumstances, naturally, in which case we will let you know."

They said their goodbyes and exchanged hugs—warm and open from Christopher and hesitant from Adalira—and made their way home.

"What's troubling you?" Walden asked once they reached the household.

"Nothing," said Cecilia, taking out her earrings on her way to the bedroom. "Just a little tired, that's all."

"Cecilia." He stopped her with a hand on her elbow. "I know you find it difficult to let others in, but please, talk to me."

She swallowed. "It's Adalira," she said, fanning out the dangles of the earrings in her hand and scrunching them together again. "Every time we get together, it seems like she's trying to avoid me. And it's even more awkward when she isn't. I think she hates me. It's like I did something to offend her, but I have no idea what."

"Ah." Walden took the earrings from her and placed them on the dresser. He pulled her into his arms. "I don't know why Adalira would be acting in such a way, but I do know that you have done nothing wrong." He kissed her shoulder and neck and took the elastic from her hair, running his fingers through it. "In fact, if she cannot see what an amazing woman you are, she is missing out."

Cecilia tilted her head back and wrapped her arms around him under his suit jacket. "Is she?"

"Oh yes," said Walden, and her breath caught as he kissed her throat. He unzipped her dress slowly. "She is missing out on the most intelligent, beautiful, funny, sexy woman I have ever known."

"Sexy?" Cecilia asked, arching against him.

"Incredibly." He pushed the dress off her shoulders, revealing her breasts. He cupped them, making her gasp as he rolled her nipples under his thumbs.

"I'm not the only sexy one here," she said, stripping him of his jacket, even if that did mean he had to take his hands off her for a moment. She grabbed him by his belt loops and walked backward to the bed.

"Well, that is a relief. It would be terrible for you to be subjected to an unattractive lover."

She laughed as he lifted her up and tossed her on the bed, his

strength surprising her all over again.

"Luckily I won't have to worry about that as long as you're around," she said, watching him as he undressed. He did it with a deliberately casual grace that he knew would drive her wild. And when his erection sprang free of his boxers, she bit her lip, letting out a whimper that would be embarrassing if she weren't so turned on.

He leapt onto the bed with her and kissed her, long and deep. He took off her glasses, setting them on the nightstand. He touched her, and his hands seemed to throw sparks as he ran them along her body. She dug her fingertips into his back, needing him. Wanting him. Every inch of him right then and there.

"Make love to me," she begged. "Please. I need you inside me."

He pulled her dress off her, taking her panties off with it. He stroked her, the evidence of her arousal clear, although she wasn't as stiff as his hard shaft. She didn't need to be. His hand around her felt amazing, and she tilted her hips into his touch.

The green, leafy pattern of his magic bloomed around them as he cast a lubrication spell and worked first one finger of his free hand inside her, then two, opening her up. She lifted her legs for him, giving him full access to her body.

"Yes," she groaned as he pushed his length inside her at last. "Oh God, Walden! Yes!"

**

A week passed. Walden worked, meeting with Beatricia and others to draft new legislation for the Realm, and Cecilia waited to hear if she would be running the land's first tele-com service or not. She experimented with the network spell, trying to figure out what features of the World's internet she could adapt for this sort of magic, but there was only so much she could do without the Realm's backing.

She had just finished setting the table when the door chimed, and she jumped.

"They're here already? Dammit! Do you think we should have cooked dinner instead of buying it? We should have cooked. Christopher cooked. They'll notice it came from the Market, won't they, and then what will they think?"

"If Christopher cooked, it's because he enjoys serving as much as Adalira enjoys being served," said Walden, rubbing her arms. "They're here for the company, not the cooking."

"If you say so," Cecilia replied.

He kissed her. "Come, let's welcome our guests."

They made it through dinner without incident, and neither Adalira nor Christopher sneered at their Market-bought meal. After, they went to the conservatory. Christopher cornered Walden, asking about the progress on one of his plants and leaving Cecilia to entertain Adalira.

Cecilia swirled the wine in her glass. "So I've been reading the original Star Wars trilogy," she said at last, trying to get some kind of conversation started.

Adalira perked up. "Is that so?"

"Yeah." Cecilia took a drink. "It's fun. I keep trying to compare them to the movies, though."

"How do they compare?" Adalira asked, tucking her hair behind her ear. "I mean, are the novelizations accurate?"

"I'm not sure." Cecilia shifted on her feet. "Honestly, it's been so long since I've seen them that I don't remember most of the details. But I think they are."

"Oh." Adalira tapped her nails against her wineglass. "It must have been incredible, though. To actually see it all. The Death Star. The lightsaber battles. Han Solo, Leia?"

"I guess. Like I said, it's been a while."

They lapsed into silence again, each drinking deeply. Cecilia cast a desperate look in Walden's direction, hoping he might rescue her, but it was no use. She could see that Christopher had gotten him talking about the violets, and there was no stopping him once he got started on the violets. Cecilia was on her own with someone who looked like she wanted to be anywhere else right at that moment.

"What do you have against me?" Adalira asked, and Cecilia nearly spilled her wine.

"What are you talking about? You're the one who's been avoiding me."

Adalira blinked. "I'm not—"

"Aren't you?" Cecilia asked. "We used to get along well in the network—really well, or at least I thought we did. Now we can't get through a two-minute conversation without it turning awkward, and every time we hug, I swear it's like you're actually afraid to touch me. I keep trying to figure out what I did wrong, but the only thing I can think of isn't what I've done but who I am, and that this is my ex-wife rejecting me all over again, and—"

"You didn't do anything wrong," said Adalira. "I don't even know

you, not really.”

Cecilia frowned. “But—”

“I don’t remember our time in the network.” Adalira stared down at her wine. “When I was being ... questioned, in prison, I had to purge some of my memories. Sensitive information I couldn’t let the other side have. I only know what I did during the war from reading reports, secondhand accounts. I know you, but I don’t remember you. Then, the first time I saw you—” Adalira took a deep breath. “I’ve never been attracted to a woman before. I don’t know what to do with someone else’s vagina. I like penis—love penis—and after almost two thousand years, I’ve gotten pretty damn good with them. Then you walked into my life, and even if the memories are gone, the emotions are still there, and all I want to do is get you in my bed, but I have no idea what to do with you once you’re there, and I’m afraid I’ll be bad at it, and you’ll hate me, and—”

“I don’t have a vagina.”

Adalira stopped. “You—”

“Have a penis,” Cecilia said, her face going hot. She hadn’t meant to blurt it out like that, but now that she’d said it, there was no taking it back. “I’m, um, I’m trans. And I lost a lot of people who I thought loved me back in the World because they wanted me to be a man. I don’t care how much experience you have, how much you have to learn. When you started avoiding me, I was terrified that you’d found out and that, well . . .”

Please don’t hate me, she thought. Prayed. *Please, please don’t hate me*.

Adalira grabbed her by the back of the neck and kissed her. When she pulled back, she was smiling, looking at Cecilia the way Walden had right before sweeping her away in a wave of passion.

“Walden,” Adalira called across the room. “I’m stealing your wife.”

“We’re married now, are we?” Walden remarked. “And what does my wife have to say about being stolen?”

Cecilia grinned. “Your wife says she’ll be home in time for dinner ... some time next week.”

“Ah. And I suppose you expect me to pine away until your return,” said Walden, his dry tone failing to cover the smile in his voice.

“Not at all,” said Adalira. “I’m leaving Christopher with you.”

Before either of the men could reply, a pattern of lights like the old IMAX laser show surrounded Cecilia. And in a flash—literally—she found herself in Adalira’s bedroom.

“That was sudden,” Cecilia said.

Adalira took the wine from her and put both their drinks on the

dresser. "I did say that all I wanted was to get you in my bed."

Cecilia wrapped her arms around the other woman's shoulders and kissed her. "I'm not complaining. I really thought you hated me, though."

"You're smart and gorgeous and you call Walden *Obi-Wan Kenobi*," said Adalira. "How could I not love you?"

She kissed her again, and Cecilia opened to her, tasting the sweet wine on her lips.

Adalira's arms circled her waist, her hands running up and down her back. "I'm still not sure what I'm doing with a woman," she confessed. "With or without a penis, I don't expect making love with you to be like making love to a man. I just ... teach me. Please. Show me how to love a woman."

"All you have to do is touch me," said Cecilia, guiding Adalira's hand up to her breast. "Everywhere you've ever imagined touching me. All the ways you've ever wanted to be touched. Ever since coming to the Realm with Walden, I've realized how much I love my body, all of it, and how much I love sharing it with someone who really, truly wants to be with me. I'll let you know what's working. What isn't. Just remember that if I need a spell to get completely hard, that's not you, that's the hormones."

"I've thought about touching you a lot," said Adalira, caressing Cecilia's breast through her dress. Gently at first, almost hesitantly, and then harder, cupping with her palm and kneading with her fingers. She started in with her other hand as well, giving both breasts her full attention. "And licking, and nibbling, and sucking . . ."

A delicious shudder went through Cecilia, both from what Adalira's hands were doing and from the thought of Adalira's mouth all over her. "Oh God, yes. All of that."

She unbuttoned Adalira's blazer and slipped it off her. She then tugged her blouse free of her skirt, reaching under the shirt to cup the other woman's breasts. Cecilia made a sound in the back of her throat at the soft roundness under her hands; she'd forgotten how much fun it was to play with someone else's boobs.

Adalira shivered under her touch as she massaged her, kneading and caressing. Cecilia pinched her nipples, rolling them between her fingers, loving the way Adalira whimpered and gasped.

"Oh, wow. I could get used to this." Adalira unbuttoned the front of Cecilia's dress and started working her over again, giving special attention to her nipples now.

"Yes," Cecilia breathed, arching into the touch of Adalira's hands

on her bare skin. "Oh my God, yes, just like that."

Making quick work of the buttons on Adalira's blouse, Cecilia stripped it from her and ran her hands once more along her perfect, bronze skin.

"God, you're gorgeous," she said.

"Thank you." Adalira laughed. "I don't know why that means more coming from another woman, but it does."

Cecilia grinned. "I don't know why, either. But why don't we see what else means more?"

She unzipped Adalira's pencil skirt, giving it a gentle push over her hips so that it slid to the floor. She cupped the woman's naked ass and lifted an eyebrow. "No underwear?"

"Underwear gets in the way," she replied. "Especially when I've decided I need Christopher under me right this instant."

"I'd believe it." Cecilia kissed her, running her fingers through the soft nest of hair between Adalira's legs and teasing her slit. Adalira whimpered, and slick wetness soon coated Cecilia's fingers as she plunged inside her.

"Oh fuck!" Adalira gasped, rocking her hips against Cecilia's hand. "Oh fuck, you're good at that."

"That's not the only thing I'm good at." Cecilia took Adalira's hand and drew her to the bed. "Sit down."

Adalira sat. "Usually I'm the one giving orders here," she said, watching with a hungry smile as Cecilia took off her glasses and set them next to the wine. Adalira became a good deal blurrier, but Cecilia didn't have to be able to see the beautiful woman in front of her to appreciate her or know what to do with her.

"Is that a problem?" Cecilia asked, kneeling between her legs.

Adalira laughed, her laugh becoming a throaty sigh as Cecilia ran her hands up her thighs. "From you? I think I like taking orders from you."

"In that case, I'm going to make sure you keep liking it." Working with her fingers again, Cecilia pressed her mouth to Adalira's clit, licking and sucking as the juices flowed.

"Fuck!" Adalira gripped the back of Cecilia's head, spurring her on. "Oh fuck, oh fuck, oh FUCK yes, Cecilia!"

Adalira's muscles clenched around Cecilia's hand as she screamed her name. Cecilia pressed her fingers against her inner wall, keeping the other woman's orgasm going as long as she could.

Adalira collapsed across the bed, breathing hard. Cecilia rocked back on her heels and licked her fingers clean.

"That was ... I'm ... wow."

Cecilia climbed up next to Adalira and kissed her. "I take it you liked it?"

"Like doesn't even begin to cover it," she replied. She stripped Cecilia of her dress and underwear and rolled her onto her back. "Now it's my turn to show you what I'm good at."

She took Cecilia's penis in her hand and began stroking her, slowly at first, then harder, squeezing her just right.

"Oh God!" she gasped, thrusting into Adalira's grip.

"Now, this." Adalira chuckled, a low, sensual sound. "I know what to do with this."

She lowered her head, covering Cecilia with her mouth. Cecilia whimpered, gripping the sheets with both hands as the other woman sucked her, doing things with her tongue that made Cecilia wonder if she'd actually died and if heaven was full of daemons instead of angels.

When Cecilia thought she couldn't take any more, Adalira sat up and straddled her hips. Cecilia worked her spell quickly, putting a little starch in her erection as Adalira lowered herself onto her.

"Oh God, yes!" she moaned as the other woman enveloped her, hot, wet, and gripping her dick like nothing else. Adalira rode her faster, harder, crying out with every thrust.

"Oh fuck yes!" Adalira threw her head back, the walls of her vagina tightening with another orgasm.

Cecilia grasped Adalira's hips as she came, her back arching off the mattress with the force of it. "Oh my God, Adalira!"

After a long, intense crest and crash, the wave of climax receded, leaving Cecilia warm and dazed. Adalira leaned down and kissed her, stretching out on top of her.

"That was decidedly different," said Adalira.

"Good different?" Cecilia asked, running her fingers through Adalira's hair.

"Definitely good." Adalira cupped Cecilia's breast, circling the nipple with her thumb. "And I can't wait to do that again. And again, and again, and again."



TO REBALANCE THE BODY

BY BOGI TAKÁCS

MASTER VIIREN PREFERENCES THEIR evening tea made with sweetberries and sage, with half a spoon of acacia honey, but today they requested a sharp and bitter combination of mint and frostleaf. They are having a cold on top of the illness, and this makes them gloomy and withdrawn.

A spot just below my collar starts to itch as I'm pouring the hot water. A relief—my master's medication has been overdue. I bring them the tea, my hands gripping the tray just a trifle too hard. My muscles have been hurting from the tension, and the underclothes beneath my purple robes are soaked through with sweat. I just want my master to be well, or at the very least, better. Doctor Senaro assured us that the medicine would soon start working.

My master peers up at me from within a castle of pillows and thick blankets. They look miserable and shriveled, the dark curls of their hair hanging limply, as if the locks were straightening out under their own weight. The light brown of their skin is blotchy with pallor. They draw a blanket even tighter around themselves before they reach for the tea. They frown.

"Is it time yet?" they ask.

"Yes, master, I think so," I say, and I take off my robes, remove my plain cotton undershirt. I look down, straining my neck: the vesicle just below my collar looks ready to pop, skin tight and convex like the top of a fermenting jar. I sit next to my master and they put an arm around me, raise another. They experimentally touch the spot, and for a moment I think it will burst right away, but it holds. Master Viiren sighs softly, and then they push the sharpened nail

of their ring finger against the skin. We have the same skin tone, but now they look so much paler that the contrast startles me. It's as if the blood has withdrawn from their fingertips.

The vesicle pops after a moment, and my master puts their mouth against the opening to drink. I close my eyes, focusing on our connection. I always feel the need to be close to Master Viiren, and every single touch of theirs is comforting: even their dry, chapped lips and clammy fingers exude a warmth that goes beyond the body, beyond bare physicality. They linger for a moment after they're done, and I know they need my presence as much as I need theirs, a symmetry in asymmetry.

They pull away from me, frowning. They cough hoarsely, and I know it's the cold: the medicine for their illness tastes sweet, and it eases their pain quite fast. It is pleasing to drink; they were troubled by this at first, but they got used to it. Medicine is not supposed to taste good. I only wish its effects would be more permanent, but Doctor Senaro says that the time for that will eventually come. Healing will come. Then why the sudden frown, the moment of displeasure?

"You have so many scars already," my master finally says, and I follow their gaze and glance down on my torso, dotted and cratered with popped vesicles, breaking the symmetry of the magical lines etched into my flesh.

How do I respond? I just want my master to get better; I really do. I don't mind the scars. I even feel pride upon looking at them: tangible reminders of my loyalty, my devotion. I think Master Viiren understands, but they are still somewhat bothered, and I can't quite set their mind at ease.

"Would my master like some of my magic? It might help," I offer.

They sigh. "Thank you, but I don't think I could absorb it right now."

I wish they would accept. I wish they could. It is such a lonely feeling for me, not being able to offer, not being able to share. Ordinarily, the magical exchange is one of the pillars of our relationship: one among many exchanges, but one that represents something fundamental to us. One that also parallels our voluntary asymmetry of power, and our shared love.

But I will not be able to share my magic today, either. This has been going on for days, and I feel like they are stuck in a vicious circle of ever poorer health. And now this unexpected cold—

A spot on my neck below my right ear starts to itch.

My muscles tense up again. So soon? I'm only supposed to have one vesicle per day.

Master Viiren notices the change in me. "Biruyan?" They lean forward, hold onto my arms. "What's wrong?" Not *is something wrong?* They already know the answer to that question. They know me very well, and I know them likewise; this is my tenth year of being their body servant. I know how they like their tea, how they like their blankets, how they like their clothes. I know where to put their hairsticks, their galoshes, their underwear. I know how to soap their back in the shower and how to braid their hair. The latter took quite a while to learn, as my fingers are clumsy and my motions often abrupt.

I tense my muscles even now. Why am I so afraid?

"Biruyan?" My master sounds uncertain.

I must stay strong, for their sake. I'm so afraid of losing them! But this illness is curable. The fluid from one vesicle a day.

"I can feel another one ripening, master," I say. "It itches."

"Let me look?" Their fingers trace my neck where I indicate. The vesicle pops from the lightest brush of my master's fingertips. Dark purple fluid runs down my neck.

Master Viiren looks me in the eye, puzzled. "We should ask Doctor Senaro about this," they say.

"He's out of town for the week." I pause. "Would my master like another cup of tea?"

I dab at the wound with a cloth, and then I busy myself with the tea. The wound doesn't hurt; the fluid desensitizes the skin.

Just as I'm pouring the steaming water—again—another spot starts to itch.

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Three hours later, Master Viiren has a small jar full of the fluid gathered from the vesicles, and I'm running a fever. Four hours later, I'm bedridden. My master has called in the majordomo, trusting her not to spread the word, lest the rank and file house-servants panic. Ahn Riesa tucks us in, makes tea for us both and a simple herbal cough suppressant for my master, and sends her eldest daughter Ihan out to look for a doctor and her eldest son Muran to check up on the twin girls, hopefully asleep.

Will Ihan have to ride all the way to the city at the mouth of the Valley just to find a doctor?

I'm shaky and woozy. I'm wrapped in white linens increasingly spotted through with purple. My master has one thick arm around me, and I think about how the doctor will react. If it's a foreigner, I will have to explain about us: about power exchange, about magical exchange, about gender ... and then I just close my eyes and snuggle into my master's broad, warm, soft chest, and everything is all right.

**

I wake with a startle, staring at the new doctor.

He is clearly from far away; the last I saw someone with such stalk-straight hair was when I met the Inharaw ambassador's son during last year's summons to the city. His skin is brown, but a shade more ruddy than ours, and his eyes are small. His dark doctor's cape hangs crooked on his narrow frame. His mouth is thin, bracketed by two folds of flesh. He looks displeased, and I'm concerned he's showing his negative emotions so openly. Does he have no respect for my master?

Master Viiren sits up with difficulty and coughs a little. I wonder how much time has passed, if the cough suppressant has worn off.

I almost fall asleep again during the introductions despite my wariness. The tall, thin doctor is called Benurh—I do not catch the patronymic and matronymic—and he gives my master his respects very grudgingly. I have an instant dislike of him. It is never very easy with me and doctors: even here in the Valley, most people are either female or male, and doctors are especially prone to fitting their patients into the more common patterns. Wet-coughing cold versus dry-coughing cold. Male versus female.

Master Viiren usually puts doctors in their place. But does this stranger understand that he's supposed to offer them respect? He turns to me with a displeasure that mirrors mine, and he asks for my gender. I'm confused for a moment, and then I realize that he cannot tell it from my clothing, as I'm still wrapped in the sheets.

"Neutral," I mutter.

Now that he knows which ones to pick, he greets me with the proper forms.

Master Viiren explains about their sudden illness. They don't have to explain about their gender. Everyone knows the Master of Hairen Hills even in the city, and their sturdy androgynous presence seemingly draws even more admirers with age. Or maybe the doctor doesn't know, and he's just less comfortable asking a person

with so much earthly power.

When it comes to the treatment, my master asks if I wish to speak. “Biruyan found out about this new treatment, and our doctor, Senaro, was willing to go with it. It’s probably best if Biruyan explains.”

“It’s fascinating!” I begin. The doctor makes a face, and I try to ignore him while I go on. I like to explain things I know in great detail. “There is a certain parasite in the western marshes, the dokwa worm. During its reproductive cycle, it lays eggs in flesh—preferably human flesh—and it makes small vesicles in the flesh—like bubbles, if you will—that it fills with the eggs’ ideal growth medium.” Do I sound too technical? Benurh is a doctor, he should be able to understand me. “It was discovered by researchers from Anhyak-Dirban recently that the growth medium has many healing properties—it is anti-inflammatory, for example.”

I pause and look at him, to prompt him into some kind of response. Is he following me? I have trouble making sense of others’ reactions when I’m paying attention to my own speech.

“Makes sense,” the doctor finally says. “It needs to preserve not only the eggs, but also the host.”

I nod eagerly. “And if you put the worms near blue mountaintone for a while, they become sterile. They produce vesicles but do not lay eggs, just fill them with growth medium.”

He looks disgusted, but not repulsed, if such a combination of emotions even makes sense. He’s a doctor; he shouldn’t be repulsed by anything biological. Yet he seems permanently disgusted anyway. It’s probably his outlook in life. At least I hope this was not provoked by our genders, by the nature of our relationship, by whichever detail is unfamiliar to him.

“What happens to the worms after they produced the vesicles?” he asks.

I frankly don’t know. “No one’s really sure; they seem to vanish. At least that’s what the autopsies have found. They might be absorbed into the growth medium, or maybe they are destroyed by the host body.” *My body*, I want to say, but I’m not sure how he’d react.

“So you’ve been—” He searches for the right verb. Is there a right verb? “Having these worms.”

“Yes, a courier brings them from the West beyond the Valley. One set lasts for about two weeks. This is the second set, and ... I’m frankly not sure what’s wrong. There should not be more than a

single vesicle a day. Maybe two spaced quite far apart, but definitely nothing like this.”

“Let’s unwrap you and see,” he says, his face smoothing out a little for the first time since we started talking. He does have at least some semblance of caretaker’s instinct; I can feel it in the impression his mind makes, and this gives me a measure of relief.

He puts on gloves and removes the sticky sheets with a frown, rubs the purple stains of growth medium off my skin. He runs a finger along the lines. “You’re magical,” he says, a statement rather than a question. He’s not magical himself, or he would have sensed. It’s impossible not to sense me.

I nod, and he motions me to roll on my stomach. He examines the lines on my back. “And quite powerful, judging from this setup,” he says. “I’m afraid you’ll have to explain—I’m not familiar with the configuration.”

I’m not sure why this is relevant. Do I need to satisfy his idle curiosity? He certainly doesn’t see someone like me every day. At least he hasn’t yet commented on my genitals, my chest, my body hair. Sometimes doctors feel an urge to lecture me on how I am sufficiently or insufficiently neutral in my gender, as if it weren’t different from my sex—another uncommon matter, but entirely separate. These should not even be mentioned, for they have no relevance to the issue at hand, but some doctors insist, and I can never tell in advance who will. I know who to trust in the Valley, but none of *those* people were available at this hour. I grimace and look up to my master. They motion at me to speak.

“It’s an uncommon configuration because I don’t need to draw on outside sources of magic,” I say. “The power arises from within me.”

I’m always afraid when I tell this to strangers. Many years ago, the ruler of the Valley wanted to force me into her army, and only my master’s intervention saved me from that fate.

The doctor only says “Mmm.” His fingers trail my back. I have an urge to jump up and run away.

“Relax, Biruyan,” my master says. I take a deep breath. My muscles loosen up a little. Master Viiren puts a hand on the back of my head, and I finally relax, sighing deeply. I’m reminded of them caressing me just as much as I’m reminded of them holding me firm.

“Do you have excess magic sometimes?” the doctor asks after a while.

“Yes, doctor,” I say. “Quite frequently.”

“Mhm. That’s what I thought, from the pattern.”

His attitude feels changed somewhat, but I can't quite describe how. Does he feel scientific curiosity? He doesn't come across as voyeuristic; he's more calculating than emotionally involved. I feel I should not be dreading his questions, but I am. He is clearly not from here, and strangers are always a risk. I remind myself that he does know the proper ways to address me, so he must be at least somewhat informed. I think the Inharaw only allow people to be men and women, as if you could somehow disallow all other genders.

"So what do you do when you have excess?" he asks.

"I usually give it to Master Viiren," I say. "I'm bound to them. I also sometimes ground it off outside in the grove."

I hope he doesn't ask more. I don't know how to describe the Bond to nonmagical people, and I also understand that an explanation might lead to even more intrusive questions. Yes, I am my master's body servant, their bondsperson who provides them with magic to supplement their own, but our relationship is infinitely more intimate than these bare words could describe. We love each other; we hold on tight to each other; we clutch each other as we fall asleep.

The Inharaw traders from across the sea whom I'd met in the city couldn't understand how I could possibly serve willingly, how I could choose this life. But this is not just what I desire: this is what I need. This is what both of us need. We are a pair. In the Valley, people know about us, and possibly some in the city too. But in far-off lands, in the Empire, the only asymmetric relationship people can conceive of is slavery. I know this all too well. Those people could not understand the love between us, or the gentleness. Those people could not understand that my master's daughters were my daughters too, if not related to me by flesh and blood. I hope fervently that the girls won't wake, peek in in curiosity. I can explain everything clearly to the doctor. I just don't want to hear his response. Where is he from?

Doctor Benurh is hesitating. I tense up again, and I have to force calm on myself. Will he pry?

Instead, he asks something unexpected. "Do you have excess right now?"

I definitely do. I've been too worried to let it go. It builds up and I don't even notice: my master notices, balances me out, but they've been feeling so unwell. I've been telling myself that my master might need my magic urgently, even though they have been refusing it for days. I've also been fussing around them too much to even venture outside. The girls have been bringing me what I needed. I haven't

been taking care of myself. But how can I describe what I feel? I nod in silence, answering him.

"That's what I thought. When did you last release the excess power?"

"Four, five days ago?" I'm guessing. I don't even remember. Maybe when I rushed out to get some chives for my master's meal, stopped for a moment.

"I've been having trouble absorbing it," Master Viiren says, helping me out. I am grateful. "Larger amounts need some concentration from me, and with this cold on top of the illness, it has been difficult. But I don't see how this is related—" They stop themselves. Their breath hisses. I can feel that they understand, but I don't, and I'm too nervous for detailed thoughts to make it across our bond.

"Biruyan." The doctor addresses me. I turn on my back again to look up at the doctor. Another vesicle pops from the pressure.

"Yes, doctor?"

"What have you been thinking about for the past few days?"

This is worse than prying. This is too intimate. But my master urges me to go on.

"I just ... I want Master Viiren to feel better. I'm so worried. I'm frightened. The illness is bad enough, but this sudden cold on top of it ..." I draw my arms around myself, and it occurs to me that my pose must mirror my master's, seen from the outside. "I wish I could help somehow, anyhow."

Doctor Benurh nods. "You wish and your body obeys."

I fight the urge to slap my forehead, desperately holding onto some semblance of the servant's practiced elegance. Bodies are simple. This was one of the first things I'd learned when Master Viiren was helping me get a handle on my magic.

"Just how much effort went into this, Biruyan?" my master asks softly. It's a question with an answer they already know. For days I've been thinking of little else than my own uselessness, my inability to serve effectively. My desire to help Master Viiren.

"I—I don't know," I mutter. "A lot." I was eager to help. I wanted to help my master heal more rapidly, and my body interpreted my desire as a command to produce more of the medicine. But by what mechanism? Magic usually goes along the path of least resistance. The worms must have proliferated somehow. Maybe the sterilization process was incomplete, the blue mountainstone not sufficiently potent? But the vesicles were so far all empty, save for the fluid.

"You don't have to think about how it works, Biruyan," my master

says, and I understand they are more aware of my mind than I am of theirs, regardless of their condition. They are simply more observant, more practiced. More mindful. I want to think about how it works. I want to figure it out.

Doctor Benurh nods after a moment of hesitation. “What’s more important is what to do now.”

My master frowns. “I don’t think e can stop fixating on my well-being right now.”

The doctor raises his eyebrows, turns to them. “Even if you command em so?”

Master Viiren sighs. “I am afraid.”

“Then we just need to get rid of the excess.”

I’m not sure that’s possible. When I’m agitated, I just produce more and more magic, and when I try to stop, I get stuck in a spiral; it gets even worse. How does the saying go? *Do not think of the golden peacock.* It’s an impossible task. I think our faces tell something of this to the doctor, for he nods, solemnly.

“Some of that power could be of benefit to your master,” he suggests.

“Maybe, if I can absorb it,” says Master Viiren. “We’ll see. Still, this is hardly a solution.”

“Then I’m afraid the only solution is to have em sleep as much as possible. No waking consciousness, less agitation, less mental influence on the body. I have just the potion.” He rummages in his sidebag, pulls out and unfolds an intricately tied bundle of small vials. “Things will balance out in a few days; the cold will certainly be gone. I can also help with that, give you a recipe for a brew.”

“Thank you, this is most appreciated,” my master says with all earnestness. Then they pause. “Sleep would be good.”

Just their mention of sleep makes me crash. I don’t remember the rest of the conversation, even though I haven’t yet tasted the potion. I only have a vague memory of dressing, clumsily, but with great relief. I know from much experience that after I’ve dressed, the time for the most intrusive questions is past.

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I wake in the middle of the night with a startle, my feet tangling in the sheets. There is a strong smell of our sweat. Both of us must have slept.

My master stirs beside me. They turn toward me, draw me closer

to themselves. Their skin is soft, and through the sweat I can still smell the rosehip massage oil I used on their shoulders and back just yesterday. Two days ago? Three days ago? I can't get a hold on time. I'm woozy, and not just from the sudden awakening. Magic pushes against my skin, and I try to remember what I was supposed to do. Sleep? I just woke. Excess?

I must ground it off. Outside. I must somehow drag myself outside. I don't think I can sleep. Outside.

I try to disentangle myself from the embrace. I mutter quietly, so as not to wake the girls one room over. "I have to—"

"Give to me," they whisper. "Give it to me."

It feels like my body is cracking open from all the tension, all the hurt. I feel all flesh and no skin, no barrier between us. I push myself into their body. Did I cry out? I must have, for they lock their arms around my head, my mouth against their sternum. I shudder, and magic leaves my body in great gasps, with a sense of urgency, of purpose.

My face is wet. I smear myself into their skin, into their flesh. I give myself over. And they reach out, they hold me, envelop me, and they take.

They are all around me, and I am in them, incorporated, balanced, satisfied. In my place.

Then we sleep, falling, toppling into the dark, holding onto each other.

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No new vesicle the next morning. The rumpled bedsheets remain white. I pull myself up, only for my master to push me back. "Sleep."

Do we both sleep? I don't know. The blankets and pillows surround me, and I dream of flying.

How much exhaustion can accumulate in the body?

**

The next day, my master isn't coughing any more. Color returns to their cheeks, their hands.

I sleep an extreme amount, and yet every time I stir with concern. There is one vesicle a day.

**

I am awake, more and more, and yet less aware, dazed and in a fog. I braid my master's hair, massage their back, return them to a more measured and elegant life.

It's the body, being saturated with relief. It's the embrace.

*
**

Alertness returns to me as health returns to my master. One morning I can even get up to eat breakfast with the girls. While I make the morning tea, strong and hearty, Master Viiren fries some vegetables. Tears run down my cheeks. They wouldn't have to do this for me, but their food nourishes me, as my body has nourished them.

As I fall upon my bowl, burning with newfound hunger, the younger twin, Indyeren, pokes at my shoulder and shows me the newsspread she's been reading. "Your doctor," she says. I look.

The famous physician Benurh, son of Andazar and Hihuan of Gistikazil Islands, has finished his expedition in the Valley region and will return to the Academy in the near future. His knowledge on the transmission of erwuz from horses to humans will prove invaluable to all of us, especially—

I blink. "He's famous? I had no idea."

"Muran found him in the stables, knee-deep in dirt," Indyeren says. "Had to get him cleaned up first. He was very displeased. Said he was on the verge of a very important discovery, but there was a piece he was still missing."

My master chuckles.

I read on, skipping ahead. He credits his conceptual breakthrough to the time spent in Viiren House, where he learned about a novel, experimental treatment of a different illness, one that allowed him to make inferences by analogy. I read Benurh's explication of the mechanism, or at least however the newsspeople have summarized his discovery. I know little about erwuz, but I recognize the source of his analogy: the parasite that spends part of its lifecycle in the horse, vesicles bursting. I also understand the differences: in horses, the fluid does not preserve the eggs, but rather in itself acts as a source of contagion.

There is a mention of me by name. Doctors are good at providing their sources. There is no mention of magic.

I glance up again. "Master? Where is the magic?"

"Horses are not known for generating large, uncontrolled quantities," my master chuckles.

I smile. “Well, if there’s a sudden outbreak, he will know what to suspect.” My power is rare, but by no means unique. Though I do doubt it extends to horses.

“You can tell him that yourself,” my master says. “He’s coming to visit on the weekend before heading back to the Academy.”

This end of the Valley is out of the way. He’s coming to visit not just to drop by, rest from his travels, but because he genuinely wants to talk. To my master? To me? Both of us?

“Patient followup visit,” my master smiles. “Besides, I promised him a taste of your famous tea.” Indyeren and Miharen giggle in unison.

I bow my head and smile to myself, glimmering with power. My master walks up to me and hugs me from behind, their thick arms crossing over at my neck. I turn my head sideways and lightly kiss their upper arm. Then I lean forward, and for a moment it is hard to tell where each of us ends and where the other begins. The magic flows gently; the stream rights itself as our bodies rebalance. I know there will be no more vesicles, and no more need.



WELCOME

RACHEL K. ZALL

NAHLA FELT THE WATERS move around her as the magicks flickered her through them like a light flashing through the peaks of waves. She was late already, and not for the first time or the hundredth, she wished she could use the byways, where other Nixies crossed oceans at speeds that would make light itself jealous. But she couldn't afford that luxury. The waterways of the Polyarchy weren't a place she could be safe—not when everyone knew what she had forsaken her duty and her heritage to become.

Nahla kept to herself, mostly. Even her name was a recent invention, chosen for the new life she hoped to lead in the Secret Cities.

She arrived in Tokyo Bay and nosed above the waters to look at her destination. The shore was covered in factories and skyscrapers. Nothing even suggested the coast she had seen when she was last here. In human society, fifteen centuries was a long time.

**

The young woman sat down on the shore, as so many had before her. She was most certainly not the first to wait for a glimpse of the Goddess of the bay, but no one stayed long. The villagers had more important things to do than wait for the unlikely. She had prepared for a long wait, however, and the seaweed salad she'd brought as tribute was covered to keep it moist.

The Nixie was tempted by the salad, but she knew it was best to avoid society, to help from afar. To watch them in their fishing boats as they came to pull up crabs around her, debating whether she even existed, or whether the food her followers left her was simply eaten by gulls. Inevitably one



would point out the scattering of shattered crab shells that proved it was just the gulls. Sometimes one of them would ask: then what was eating the seaweed?

The Nixie spent several hours waiting for the woman to fall asleep. But the woman stayed awake: her eyes calm but firm, her attention carefully focused. When the Nixie came back the next day she found the woman still waiting, having apparently not moved.

On the third day, the Nixie felt a storm rolling into the Bay. The slate-grey clouds glided in over the waters, crackling with purple bolts of lightning. Yet hours passed and the woman did not move. The Nixie worried for her safety, and she almost thought about forcing the storm back out to sea to keep the woman safe. But the danger of another Nixie noticing such an abrupt change to the weather patterns was so high that, regretfully, she had to leave the poor thing to fate.

The fourth day was bitingly cold, and the woman's clothes were still damp from the storm. The Nixie ached watching her shiver and chatter. She nudged a warm air front in as gently as she could, trying not to set off another storm in the process or draw attention.

"Please go home," she pleaded in a tiny voice.

On the fifth day, the woman still had not moved. It tortured the Nixie to stand back and watch, but she stayed, waiting. The moon rose, full and bright, and there in its light, the woman stayed. But at last she wavered, and she slouched over as though her body had changed from a human vessel to an empty, wet object.

The Nixie darted across the bay to where the woman had fallen. If she was already dead, there was no danger in approaching her, and if alive, she was definitely unconscious.

She cradled the woman in her arms, relieved to feel the vibrations of the woman's still-beating heart and the movement of her chest with the slight breaths she was still taking. The Nixie gently warmed her waters around the woman and slowly reintroduced moisture into her chapped, wind-burnt skin.

The woman opened her eyes. The Nixie was so startled that she nearly dropped her.

"Why?" the Nixie asked at last, speaking in the woman's native tongue.

She barely expected the hypothermic young woman to be capable of replying or even understanding the Nixie's clumsy imitation of human speech. But the woman's salt-chafed lips parted, and she croaked her answer: "How else could I know if my tribute was accepted by the Gods or gulls?" And after a long pause, she added, "I will not be in debt to a god I cannot see."

The Nixie assured her that she had never been in debt.

“Do you bring the spring rain?” the woman asked, “Do you keep our harbors plentiful?”

The Nixie said she did what she could.

“You guessed what we wanted and gave it to us,” the woman said, her voice strengthening and then failing mid-sentence. “I have done the same for you.” The woman rested a long time before saying, “Our debt is settled.”

The Nixie decided it was best to agree, and she offered to take the woman home.

“If you know where I live,” the woman said, “you may do me special favors. Better that my debt be no greater than the village’s debt. What I need, I can get for myself.”

The Nixie asked for permission to stay with the woman on the beach.

The woman passed out trying to refuse. The Nixie held her in her arms all night and kept her warm, rising to depart as the sun came up.

“Be well, little dewdrop,” the Nixie said.

*
**

Nahla jumped the fare gates at Roppongi Station and nearly toppled down the stairs trying to get to the platform before her contact left. She wore a thin glamour: just enough to keep the humans from noticing a naked water spirit with breasts and a penis running past them, but not so thick that a representative of The Congress wouldn’t see right past it.

She tried to ignore the little tickle of pleasure she got from striding around a crowded station naked. It was perfectly normal for Nixies, but the human taboo made it thrilling. She was making a bad enough impression by being late; being late with her traitorous clit at full mast would be a catastrophe. She tried to think of things that weren’t sexy: the stacks of boring paperwork she’d had to fill out to claim asylum with the Congress, the bland and unattractive bureaucrat surely waiting for her below.

But when she arrived on the platform, a white woman with short purple hair, a pierced lip, and a three-piece suit was waiting for her, tapping irritably at a tablet. “You are twenty-three minutes and seventeen seconds late,” the woman said without looking up.

So much for bland and unattractive. Startled, Nahla let her glamour slip for just a second, and although she tugged it back on just as quickly, all the people who’d looked up at the woman seemingly speaking to no one were now staring with confusion at the space

where Nahla's naked body had flashed into their vision and then seemingly vanished. Nahla shyly crossed her hands over her erection.

"Sorry! Sorry!" she began. "I got a late start, and—"

"Do be more careful," the woman whispered in an American accent. "It does not behoove an asylum seeker to violate the veil that keeps us safe from human eyes. Much less to do so naked and aroused." She looked up, not quite looking Nahla in the eye. "Still, this incident is no surprise. Your reputation precedes you, shall we say. My name is Morgan Merriweather, Ms. Nahla. Today I will be conveying you to Shizuku Senbazuru herself, who has done you the considerable honor of offering to personally oversee your case. Board this train with me, please."

The train roared into the station, drowning out Nahla's whispered question. "What did you say her name was?"



When the Nixie next met the young woman on the beach with her tribute, she asked the woman her name.

"I will not tell you my name unless you tell me yours," the woman said, folding her arms.

The Nixie admired her prudence and caution: handing one's true name out to a powerful being without reciprocation was a careless but common mortal error. But the Nixie had no name to trade. Her birth name was unpronounceable by human mouths, and she'd never thought to pick another.

"If you will not tell me your name, I will not tell you mine," the woman said. "You have called me 'dewdrop,' Kami-sama. You may continue to do so."

The Nixie was pleased by her mixture of reverence and defiance. A cordial battle of wills was as close to equal terms as a human had ever met her on. Dewdrop it was, then. Shizuku.



"Are you unfamiliar with our founders?" Morgan asked, taking a seat next to Nahla as the train pulled away. "Please pardon me for assuming. I often forget how incomplete the knowledge of those who live outside the Secret Cities can be. I am of the opinion that Lady Senbazuru should be thought of as one of the world's great leaders, but alas, the veil of secrecy to which we are bound to keeps

even legends hidden.”

Nahla nodded. “Can you tell me more about her? I’ve heard—rumors. About powerful women with that name.”

“My apologies, but our timetable is tight, Miss Nahla,” Morgan scowled. “There will be time enough for history lessons when our business is concluded, not before.”

*
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At first, the young woman was shrugged off by her clan as simply bragging when she said that the village’s growing prosperity was the result of a personal relationship with the goddess of the bay. But before long, it became hard for the villagers to deny that anyone who discussed their problems directly with the young woman found those problems speedily resolved.

The woman was no fool and knew not to mistake the growing respect for love, but she accepted this with little distress. Being loved had never been her priority. One day she would sit on the Chrysanthemum Throne as empress, and power, not love, was what would get her there. And who had more power than one who commanded a personal audience with a goddess?

So it was with a certain anxiety and even suspicion that she watched her emotions creep treacherously out of her careful control. As weeks passed, as she saw the goddess rise each time from the waters—her hair a graceful, glimmering wave shaking out around her head, her eyes looking at the young woman with joy and affection—the young woman found it difficult to assert to herself that the pleasure she felt was merely the thrill of power.

*
**

“It says in your paperwork that you are the only daughter of a Lady of the Chamber in the Polyarchy. Is this correct? Many beings claim noble lineages untruthfully in hopes that doing so will expedite their requests.”

Nahla snorted. “They can have mine if they want one! I’m the spawn of a Lady, but she’d argue with you about calling me her daughter.”

Morgan smiled slightly, still tapping at her tablet. “She would lose, or at least walk away. I am quite persistent, Ms. Nahla.”

Nahla smiled. There were rumors about how open the Secret Cities were to trans beings. But there were always rumors of places like that, and so often the rumors meant that only certain kinds of

trans beings were really welcome.

**

The Nixie lay on the beach looking up at the clouds overhead as Shizuku sat by her side, holding the empty bowl. She reflected back on how many millennia she'd been drifting alone around the world, how much Shizuku's company would have meant even if Shizuku herself hadn't been so enticing.

"Perhaps it's not right to break ceremony like this, Shizuku," the Nixie said, "but I wanted to tell you, I..."

She looked at Shizuku, who looked back with an unusual tension, her aura flaring with something not yet spoken. But auras were frustratingly unclear on the details of a feeling; a being's aura was all emotion and no meaning.

"I know you worry that you'll be in my debt, because I've done you many favors and all I ever ask for is seaweed and your company," the Nixie said. But I wanted to let you know you don't need to. The salad is good, but the time I spend with you is what I truly want."

The Nixie watched Shizuku's aura anxiously, waiting to see how it reacted. The response was cryptic. A flurry of happiness seemed to slip free of the restraint that so clearly characterized Shizuku's aura, and yet the tension and anxiety remained.

"Thank you," Shizuku said cautiously. "You are kind, as you have always been. But I have come to ask one more kindness of you."

The Nixie nodded for her to go on.

"There is a man in a nearby village named Katashi," Shizuku said. "I am to be married to him. He is to be uji-no-kami of his clan, and our union will bring peace between his clan and mine and assist me in my ambition to become Empress."

The Nixie smiled, prepared to congratulate Shizuku and offer a goddess's blessing. But Shizuku did not smile back.

"I ask that you kill him," Shizuku said.

Shocked, the Nixie refused and asked why.

"I do not like men. I will become Empress without one. But I cannot refuse to marry him without causing strife between our clans. If you will not kill him, tell me how to become immortal, as you are, so that I may at least live long enough that a few decades with him is a trifle."

The Nixie laughed and said Shizuku was lucky the Nixie knew of no way for her to do so. "You are as much a force of nature as me," she said. "Surely you don't really need me to murder anyone to solve this problem.

What is this actually about?"

Shizuku pursed her lips and looked at the ground, taking a deep breath before continuing with her speech as though the Nixie had said nothing. "I can offer you better tribute if that is what you require," she said.

She opened her jacket, and the tension and pleasure in her aura both blossomed as the Nixie realized that Shizuku was wearing no skirt underneath it this time.

"Assist me and I will bless you," said Shizuku.

The Nixie was startled by the young woman's beauty, although her slender body appeared to be ill-fed: Shizuku may have been feeding her better than Shizuku was feeding herself. Her small, tan breasts were tipped with wonderful tiny nipples at the center of dark, puckered areolae; her arms looked surprisingly strong for someone so undernourished. Her aura was full of hunger, and just a trace of fear.

She knew she could not let this young woman be forced to lie with a man. She thought about her own body and wondered if Shizuku would consider this any different. She feared the woman would have sex with her out of obligation rather than desire. But the Nixie could sense the presence of nearby waters, and she knew the woman's vagina was already moist at the thought of consummating their relationship.

"Is my body acceptable?" the Nixie asked shyly, gesturing at her erection.

Shizuku smiled, and her breath skipped a beat to see even a deity question whether she was worthy of her. "You are a goddess," Shizuku purred. She gestured for the Nixie to come closer. "Your body is divine. Come to me, Kami-sama."

The Nixie stepped forward, put a hand on Shizuku's side, and gently pulled her in for a kiss. Shizuku kissed back ravenously, pressing her hands firmly to the Nixie's breasts to direct her to the ground. Passion swelled in her to see the goddess of the bay submit so eagerly, and she wrapped the Nixie's wrists with her hands as tightly as she could and sank her teeth into the Nixie's soft neck. The Nixie shivered and cried out, arching her back to try to come closer to Shizuku. But Shizuku raised herself up, staying tantalizingly out of reach.

"Do you love me, Kami-sama?" Shizuku said, teasing the tip of the Nixie's clit with her wet vulva. "Tell me you love me, only me."

She darted like a cobra to the Nixie's breast, bit down on the nipple, and was rewarded with the purest water she had ever tasted.

"Please," the Nixie gasped, "I love you, please, I love you. No one else, only you. Please, please ..."

Shizuku smiled and thrust the Nixie's clit inside, allowing herself a tiny cry before regaining her composure and her hungry grin. A bolt of

lightning in the bay illuminated their bodies, and a driving rain began to fall, and the Nixie stopped worrying about who saw the weather changing around them. There was no one in the world who mattered except Shizuku, Shizuku who bit and gnashed and thrusted violently against her, Shizuku whose matted hair flailed like a black wave around her head, Shizuku pushing the Nixie's clit as far into herself as it would go.

Their breathing fell in and out of sync, their breaths became short and rapid, and both of them swept toward orgasm like the hurricane that was gathering around them.

And then Shizuku pulled the Nixie out and rose up. The Nixie opened her eyes and looked up, pathetic with need. Shizuku was visibly struggling to contain her shivering. But she set her lips firmly, and she pulled her jacket back onto her sweat-and-rain-soaked body.

"That is not the blessing I ask, Kami-sama," she whispered. "Not this time. I do not wish to marry, but if I am forced to, to be with another's child would be the death of my aspirations. I cannot risk it."

The Nixie could see Shizuku's aura still glowing with desire, and she was nearly brought to orgasm by the thought of Shizuku leaving to find a quiet, private spot in the woods to tear open her jacket and frantically shove her fingers up into herself. Maybe she'd think about the Nixie while she did.

The Nixie told Shizuku to inform Katashi that the goddess of the bay had declared the union ill-advised. If he persisted or retaliated, his lands would be struck with drought, and his nets would be pulled in empty. She said that was the most she could offer.

Shizuku nodded distractedly as she tied her wet jacket closed and walked away. The Nixie lay in the sand writhing, watching Shizuku until she was out of sight.

*
**

"You may be aware already of the excellent health care our cities provide all residents?" Morgan asked. "Your ... genital issue can be easily remedied by our surgeons at no cost."

"I don't have an issue!" Nahla said, a little more irritably than she'd meant to. It was always this way: either she was rejected outright, or her body was looked at as a flawed imitation of a real woman's body. "Except that people keep telling me I have an issue. That's an issue."

"My apologies," Morgan said. "I meant no offense. Rest assured, Lady Shizuku has worked to build societies where all bodies are

welcome and valued."

Nahla remembered the young woman who had loved her body without judgment or assumptions, and let herself hope once again that Shizuku had somehow survived all these centuries.

"I am going to close my eyes, as I find the transition between the mundane and secret railroads distressing," Morgan said. "Please prepare yourself for departure." Just as her eyes squeezed shut, the train flashed with rainbow lights, and a majority of the passengers seemed to fade in the glare.

Nahla pressed her silly hopes back down. Her love was long dead.



One day the Nixie approached the beach and found a young woman who resembled Shizuku waiting. She watched from the water from a time, but the Nixie knew Shizuku was impeccably punctual and excellent at spotting and chasing away potential onlookers. The Nixie stepped out of the water to find out who the woman was and what she wanted.

Upon spotting the Nixie leaving the water, the woman quickly looked away and squeezed her eyes shut. "Kami-sama," she said, audibly frightened, "I regret my rudeness in approaching you. But my sister is very ill and will not be able to meet with you today. She asked only that I tell you that and then leave." The woman turned back toward the trees, eyes still closed, and skittered away.

The Nixie was concerned. Shizuku had been ill many times before, but Shizuku had never missed a date: even when she was not well enough to make love, even on days when she seemed so unwell that the Nixie could not imagine how she had walked so far at all. If she was sending representatives, something must be very wrong indeed.

On the second day, Shizuku's sister was there again, eyes closed and turned away, saying simply that Shizuku was still ill.

On the third day, she was there again, dark circles under her eyes and a weariness to her stride suggesting that she had gotten little sleep. She begged the Nixie's forgiveness and patience, and asked if she would welcome the sister as a temporary replacement.

The Nixie told her that Shizuku could not be replaced.

On the fourth day the beach was empty, and the Nixie realized that her words had been taken literally. But perhaps she had meant them that way.

On the fifth day, the beach remained empty. The Nixie sat down on the rock Shizuku had sat on when they first met and sat still, staring at the path through the trees, waiting for Shizuku to arrive.

On the sixth day, Shizuku did not arrive.

On the seventh day, Shizuku did not arrive.

On the eighth day, the Nixie saw a woman in the distance, and she rose to her feet with joy. But when it was Shizuku's sister again: closed eyes, head turned before she even came close enough to see. She informed the Nixie that Shizuku's condition had worsened and that the clan had formally agreed to send a plea for the Nixie to accept a substitute. The Nixie, tired and frightened and hurt, simply said that her priestess was special and asked that they take very good care of her.

On the ninth day, Shizuku did not arrive.

On the tenth day, Shizuku did not arrive. The Nixie considered how badly Shizuku's sister was suffering, and she considered the state of human medicine, and she considered how quickly Shizuku's sister had begun asking about substitutes. At last she gave in to her fears and accepted what she knew to be the truth.

The Nixie waited until the sun went down, hoping for one last glance of Shizuku. But of course none came. She rose and walked back into the moonlit water, alone.

**

Morgan opened a large wooden door to a sparsely decorated room where a white-haired woman stood at the window with her arms folded. She turned to greet them, and her eyes sparkled when they rested on Nahla.

“Sorry!” Nahla chirped. “I’m late, aren’t I?”

The woman smiled and swept toward her. “Extraordinarily,” she said.

“Do you know one another?” Morgan asked.

Nahla tried to see her love in this white-haired woman in her antique kimono. The woman’s smile was warmer than she had remembered Shizuku’s being, but surely fifteen centuries was enough time for even Shizuku to learn compassion and humility. Though she was clearly well-fed, Lady Senbazuru’s skeletal structure appeared roughly the same as Shizuku’s had been. But an aura was an unmistakable fingerprint that surrounded every being. This woman’s aura was completely unfamiliar.

Her spirit overflowing with pain and disappointment, Nahla replied: “No.”

**

The young woman stood at the top of a seemingly endless set of stairs that led straight down into darkness. She looked around her, but there was nothing anywhere except the stairs themselves. So she stepped down them one at a time. As she descended, each stair step vanished into the absence behind her, as though the stairs expected her to change her mind and run.

The woman was insulted: she had never run.

When she turned the final corner, she stepped into a softly lit room. Copper and iron swords with intricate handles and unknown symbols hung on all the walls. The doorways were immense, although beyond them was the same absence that seemed to exist everywhere except here in this room. Kneeling in the center was an Oni, a tall gold crown sitting by his side.

"Am I dead?" she asked, looking around.

"Merely hallucinating," the Oni said, holding out a teacup. "A fever dream. Although you'll be dead before long. Tea?"

She scowled at him until he set the cup down.

"Awful manners," he said. "You'd never have become empress on your own. If you weren't about to die, I mean." He thumped the mat in front of him with his palm. "Come, sit."

"I will die when I choose to," she said, still standing.

The Oni laughed heartily. "Such hubris! You think being obstinate will keep death from visiting you? She is at your door right now."

"Perhaps I will seduce her and bend her to my will, then," she said. "I have done so with a goddess. Did you know that?"

The Oni laughed again. "Oh, mortals! We do so love your lies and your pride. But I'm sorry, dear." The words were triumphant beneath their mock sympathy. "Your so-called goddess was just a common Nixie. A male Nixie at that! I wonder how many mortals he's fooled into loving him and then left to die? Your ambition impressed even us. And you squandered it for love." The Oni leaned forward in its crouch, putting its chin on its knuckles and sighing. "It really is a pity you're going to die, because you truly could have been empress."

"Please arrive at your point," she said. "What are you offering?"

The Oni's lips curled back over his fangs, and he held up the tall, intricate crown. "Everything you want, my dear. Live. Become empress. Men pretending to be goddesses might win the approval of a few fishermen, but it's we who can give you the world."

"And the price?"

"Price!" the Oni cried, affecting a wounded look. "I only want what's best for you. And for us. We're offering you a partnership: the first Oni empress of this land. You will be the great queen who rules over all under heaven. And we'll be you. Love will never again be able to hinder

your destiny.”

She saw herself on the Chrysanthemum Throne, crowned and guiding a unified nation to greatness. It truly was everything she wanted, everything she had worked for.

But she forced her vision past the illusion they were offering. There would be horrors that existed for no reason but to feed Oni suffering; a reign of terror and hate, all difference punished brutally. And ruling over all of it would a woman who looked like her, but whose soul would have been carved out, traded away.

She stepped forward and smacked the gold crown from the Oni’s hands. It shattered against the floor like ice.

“I told you,” she said, “I will die when I choose.” She turned toward the staircase; she found it waiting for her. “Now is an excellent time.”

**

“I’m honored to meet you, however,” Nahla said. She tried to keep her voice bright against her disappointment, to remember that Lady Senbazuru was her key to the safety and community of the Secret Cities. “I’m Nahla.”

Shizuku Senbazuru smiled. “Pardon me—allow me to slip out of my professional dress.”

Nahla had lived a long time, long enough to encompass two full rotations around the center of the Milky Way. But she had never seen anything like what she was witnessing: Shizuku’s aura, which slid like a jacket from her body, revealing another aura underneath.

**

Desperate to save their sister’s life, her siblings had allowed a strange man into the village. He had made extraordinary promises of immortality in exchange for a share of their fishermen’s catch. His word had been good.

Shizuku looked at the bite marks scarring her wrist as she listened to them explain it to the clan. Her Kami had watched over her, they said. Her Kami was stronger than evil spirits. That her hair had turned white was a blessing from her Kami representing the purity of her spirit.

Yet her clan disagreed. During her illness, the fields had turned to dust; the nets came back empty. There were angry questions and accusations. She had survived by trading her Kami for an Oni, they insisted. Her white hair was not a sign of purity; it was a sign of the pact. Her goddess must have forsaken her in disgust. The empty fishermen’s nets proved it.

She left as soon as she could stand, before the rumors could do irreparable damage to her clan. And she went down to the water eagerly to meet her goddess again. But she waited for days, hot dry days, and on the fifth day, she realized the Oni had been right about one thing. Her goddess had abandoned her. Her love was gone.

She walked along the coast, still holding out hope of finding her love rising from the waters, that there might be one thing she had not lost. Sometimes she cursed her destiny, sometimes she cursed herself.

One day she came across a shrine where an uji-no-kami spoke to his god, a water spirit like hers had been. The uji-no-kami took one look at the nineteen-year-old with white hair and recognized her immediately.

"Oni!" he shouted. "Do not come to this place! You are not welcome here!"

When she bared her fangs, he screamed and ran. The new Nixie laughed, joining her on the beach.

"A vampire pretending to be an Oni!" he laughed. "That's a new one."

"I am not pretending to be anything," she said irritably. At last she understood why her Nixie had been so afraid when they had first made love. "People see what they want to see in my body. They tell the stories they want to hear. It is nothing to do with me."

The Nixie scowled at her, investigating her aura. She had met Oni, he could tell, but she hadn't signed any contracts. Her aura was untainted.

"What's your name?" he said.

She considered. Her old life was over, her old name a reminder of failed aspirations; she would never again see her village and never ascend to the Chrysanthemum Throne. Whatever she built in the ruins of her old life, she would have to become someone new. And yet she still held out hope that she might find her love again. She still wanted to leave a trail.

"My name is Shizuku," she said.

**

Nahla stepped toward Shizuku hesitantly. "I didn't know," she whispered.

"I did," Shizuku smiled. "When I helped forge the alliances that built the Secret Cities, I knew if I made a society safe enough, welcoming enough, you'd find your way to it eventually." She reached out and took Nahla's hand in hers, her aura shimmering with pride and nervous excitement. "And here you are. Do you still love me?"

Nahla put her arms around Shizuku, weeping. "Only you," she murmured, putting her head on Shizuku's shoulder.

Shizuku kissed her neck and squeezed Nahla tightly to her breast.

“Welcome home, my love,” she said, and she smiled.

HOT STORY FOR A COOL DAY

ADONIS ALVAREZ

IT WAS 3:57. HE'S not coming, Briana thought. But she kept on getting ready, putting on a shirt and then taking it off, putting on another shirt and then taking it off. She repeated this process three or four times before settling on a brown tank top. Her blue jeans, however, took quite a bit of effort to put on. Like most pairs on the market, they weren't made to house her voluptuous Cuban figure, which resisted conventional beauty standards, and not just in the metaphorical sense. She was relieved when she finally managed to get them past her thighs, but her annoyance was quickly restored by the extra space surrounding her waistband and the fact that she hated wearing belts.

"I still got it," she said, admiring herself in the mirror like a true daughter of Venus would. The jeans hugged her ass nicely, so she reluctantly made her way to her closet to retrieve a belt. She couldn't help but notice the dust gathering on the maroon-colored hardcover as she pulled one off the hanger. She opened it carefully and read the dedication on the first page: *To all the farmers, agricultural workers, and Briana Madrigal.*

She remembered when Austin had handed her the first copy of his magnum opus, *Sustainable Equivalence*, six years ago. "Always be closing," he proclaimed, a reference to her always locking their Domino games.

"Congratulations," she said. "Maybe now you can accept that promotion."

Back then, Austin had been working as a security guard for the better part of two years. His boss had been trying to promote him

to supervisor for months. Each time he was asked, Austin kindly refused; being a supervisor meant actually having to do something at work besides sitting at the front desk and writing. Now he had to circumvent Briana's lack of enthusiasm with the same courtesy.

"Maybe after I prepare myself for the backlash," he said. She lifted one eyebrow, clearly puzzled by his statement. He continued, "This book is going to change the world."

"How do you know?" she asked.

"Because it was inspired by the woman who changed mine."

Confronted by his unyielding belief in the power of their love, she had no choice but to take his face in her hands and kiss him.

She never fathomed that a book about a lesbian serial killer, and her ex-stripper girlfriend, taking on Big Agriculture would go on to sell thirty million copies. This fact alone should have been enough to remove some of the doubt in her mind; instead she just shrugged her shoulders, put down the book, and resigned herself to the idea of eating alone. After all, it was better to be upset on a full stomach than an empty one. She took one last look at the clock—4:13—then she grabbed her purse and in one big jolt swung open the door.

Austin was there, carrying a large brown paper bag. "May I come in?" he petitioned, making his request sound like more of a demand.

"You may," she obliged. "I thought we were going out to eat?"

"It didn't make any sense going out for Pad Thai after living in Thailand for three years," he rebutted. "I also made some wontons and spring rolls, all vegetarian of course."

"No wonder you were late."

"Sorry about that."

"Don't be, the food looks great."

"So do you."

The corners of her mouth turned up involuntarily. "I'll get us some plates."

He couldn't help but stare at her ass as she bent over to retrieve them.

"Enjoying your view of the States?" she solicited, momentarily forgetting the grudge she was supposed to be holding against him.

"Yes, and this year I fully intend to flood the Mississippi," he said.

"You know nothing turns me off like your eco-terrorism," she quipped as she shoved a plate into his stomach. The act was intended to bruise him, but the plate merely bounced off his chiseled abdomen, catching her off guard. They had been the same height when they first met, but now she had to look up in order to stare him down.

He took the plate from her hands, decisively, and broke her trance with four simple words: "You forgot the forks."

"Right," she acknowledged, and went back into the kitchen.

Leave it to him to gain fifteen pounds of muscle in a developing country, she mused as she went through her utensil drawer. His curly hair fell to the middle of his back now, just the way she liked it. Luckily his mane was pulled back into a ponytail, or she wouldn't have been able to resist the temptation to run her fingers through it. He was scanning the room, surely for signs of another man's presence. His possessiveness made her hot all over. She quickly pulled out two forks and slammed the drawer behind her before he could notice her checking him out from the corner of her eye.

"Dig in," she directed as she handed him one of the forks.

"You first," he insisted.

"Don't mind if I do." And with that she began loading up her plate. He followed suit. They were almost done serving themselves when their hands touched reaching for the same wonton. She pulled away, like a child does when they stick their finger in a socket for the first time. He picked up the wonton, broke it in half, and passed the other half to her.

"Thanks."

"You're welcome."

After a while, he asked about the mushroom business. *You'd know if you would have been here*, she felt like saying, but she couldn't bring herself to be rude to him after he had prepared this delicious meal for them. *Mighty Men Mushrooms* was his idea, after all, and he had poured a great deal of time and energy into making it a reality the minute he started receiving any revenue from his book. When it became a bestseller and he started declining offers to appear on television, she confronted him about it.

"I have better things to do than talk about myself, and they're all Paleo!" he exclaimed as he held up the biggest chanterelle she had ever seen him grow. She burst out laughing, yet the youthful excitement that had coated his face that day had been replaced by a smoldering maturity, the extent of which she had only become aware of now as they ventured beyond small talk.

"Business is great," she said. "We scored four more clients this month." Even though he had legally transferred control of the company over to her, she was still used to referring to them as a unit. But he corrected her. "You mean *you've* scored four new clients this month. I knew you'd make an excellent CEO. You were an

exceptional sales rep, the best the company's ever had."

Briana had never been shy about receiving compliments, but most of them had revolved around her looks. His unadulterated confidence in her mental abilities made her blush, and so she scurried to change the subject. "How was Thailand?"

He swiftly pulled out a stack of photographs from his back pocket and handed them to her. The first showed him outside of the Permaculture Institute. The next few featured him and a group of farmers transforming decaying rice fields into lush landscapes of cassava, squash, sugarcane, bananas, pineapples, and various other crops. She lingered on the last couple of pictures for a while. They were of an intricate tree house with a bamboo porch wrapped all the way around it. In the middle laid a bed with the letters *AB* carved into the center of the frame.

"It's supposed to be our honeymoon house," he announced, after a minute of silence.

"How did you feel when you were done?" she asked, knowing that building a house had been on the top of his bucket list for years.

"It was a hollow victory," he admitted.

She knew what that felt like. When Austin had first told her about the job in Thailand, something inside her snapped. At first, she wasn't sure what it was. Confusion, perhaps? No, she understood his need to fulfill his vision better than anyone else. Although the United States had embraced his novel and the permaculture movement was growing stronger by the day, the powers that be refused to implement the "radical" changes he proposed. Thailand, on the other hand, facing massive shrimp die-offs and devastating droughts, was ready to embrace his plan wholeheartedly. The Prime Minister, who was also a vegetarian, had called him personally, and Briana couldn't shake the thought of a thousand frantic ladyboys waiting to greet him as he got off the plane. Or the fact that he had just bought a huge plot of land in Boulder, where they had planned on settling eventually.

No, the real reason she was so upset was because him leaving signified the end of her monopoly on his drive, his genius, and his passion.

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Even after the book had been adapted into an award-winning mini-series, Austin had retained his reluctant stance toward celebrit-

ism. Briana didn't know what it was like having to share him, and she was too proud to admit that she was scared of losing him. That's how she found herself undermining him at every turn, both in and out of work. Until one day he transferred control of the company over to her. The next, he didn't show up for a meeting and she changed the locks on her apartment as soon as she got home. The following morning, she awoke to a string of loud knocks. Austin bolted in as soon as she opened the door. He plopped down on her couch and waited for her to take a seat before commencing.

"Are we going to talk about this?" he asked.

"Talk about what?"

"Me going to Thailand."

"What's there to talk about?" she said.

"I assumed it'd be a good idea for one of us to stay here, to look after each other's parents and the business. But I should have consulted with you first. I'm sorry if I hurt you."

Her defenses shot up immediately. "I'm fine," she said. "You're the one who's hopelessly in love with me."

His tone was icy-hot. "You don't have to remind me of something I haven't forgotten."

"Apparently, you have."

She knew she had crossed a line when he raised his voice. "I wrote this book so I could help people!"

"I thought you wrote it as a testament to our love," she mocked.

"Will you shut up and marry me?" His response caught her off guard and she stayed quiet for a moment, but only for a moment.

"What kind of bullshit proposal was that, Austin?"

"If that's what it takes to assure you I'll come back, then I'm willing to do it," he said. She knew he wasn't a fan of the institution of marriage, rooted in misogyny and female subjugation, so the fact that he was even considering it was proof that she had accomplished what an impending food shortage fueled by climate change couldn't make him desperate.

"Get out," she muttered.

His eyes widened in disbelief, but he didn't have to be told twice. He left in the same frantic fashion as he had come. Briana wanted to relish this victory alone, except it didn't feel like much of a victory, more like a defeat.

Austin referred to this blatant abuse of power as the dark side of her moon, which was in Aries. He had no fire signs in his chart. For years she had been his fire, his muse, the guiding force behind all of

his actions. But fire could also burn, and he reflected on this painful truth as he sat in his homeboy, Alex's, tattoo shop that evening, getting drunk instead of celebrating his engagement.

"Are you sure you want to do this?" Alex asked with his needle in hand.

"Just give me my fucking tattoo man," was Austin's intoxicated response.

"All right, it's your funeral," said the tattoo artist before putting on his face mask and getting to work.

Those words seemed almost prophetic as Austin crashed his car into a tree right next to Briana's apartment. He ripped up the shirt he was wearing and used the makeshift bandages to cover up the cuts and bruises he endured as best as he could before making his way up to her apartment.

"What do you want?" she asked abrasively.

"Can you please give me a ride to the airport?"

"I thought your grandparents were taking you."

"I don't want them to see me like this."

The sun was beginning to rise, helping her make out the blood-soaked garments around his forehead and arms.

"What happened to you?" she attempted to conceal her concern but to no avail.

"You," he said.

Her eyes narrowed as she gave him the death stare.

"I got drunk and crashed my car against a tree," he admitted.

"You got drunk," she repeated as her eyes made their way to the folded napkin taped onto his chest. "And you got a tattoo?"

"Yes, Judge Judy. Now can you please take me to the airport?"

"You're not going to see a doctor or clean up the mess you made with your car?"

"They have doctors in Thailand; I'll tell my dad to come pick up the car once I'm settled."

Honestly, she was just glad he was alive and that she had gotten another chance at a peaceful goodbye. But every mile she drove only seemed to bring her farther away from closure. He was shirtless the whole time and insisted she keep the windows down to help him sober up. Briana kept peering at his chest, secretly hoping his tattoo would get so badly infected that he'd have to return. When they arrived at the airport, he leaned in for a kiss but she turned the other way.

"Thanks for the ri—"

"Don't write to me," she interrupted, knowing fully well writing was the only thing that had gotten him through their first separation.

Her words were poison that sank in slowly, and she expected some sort of backlash from him. But he just stated, "as you wish," grabbed his bags out of the trunk, and left.

Yes, Briana definitely knew what a hollow victory felt like. That's why when he had called her and suggested they have lunch, effectively ending the three years of silence *she* had imposed on them, all she was able to conjure up was: "When did you fly in?"

"Five minutes ago," he replied.

"Okay, see you tomorrow," and with that she hung up the phone.

I just want to make sure he's okay, she kept telling herself. Even then, on the verge of reconciliation, she couldn't put her pride aside. Had he been a lesser man, she wouldn't have had to confront this less than ideal quality about herself. But he was not a lesser man, and she spited him for it.



She put down the final photograph and stacked it along with the rest; her facial expression giving away her frustration at the situation. She had nearly regained her composure when her cat Ra'uf strolled into the living room. Although he was almost eleven years old now, he somehow managed to jump on Austin's lap with a vitality he hadn't exhibited since his heyday. Austin dangled a half-eaten spring roll in front of Ra'uf and let the friendly feline take a few swipes at it before tossing it into his own mouth.

"You know he hunts roaches for fun, right?" Briana commented.

"It's okay; I've probably eaten more bugs than he has in the past year. Plus—" he was speaking to the cat, who seemed slighted at having his prize taken away—"you wouldn't like these vegetables anyway. You're a carnivore, just like your mother."

He pet Ra'uf, causing the cat to purr incessantly and Briana's demeanor to soften as she remembered the days the three of them had spent lying in bed together. But her smile rapidly faded as another memory crept into her mind. She had begun to date a financial adviser named Steve a year after Austin had left. He was a decent looking guy who, despite being a bit of a snooze fest, treated her well. They had gone out for drinks one night and wound up sleeping together. She couldn't remember if the sex had been good

or bad, only that when Steve tried to kiss her the next morning, she cringed and told him to leave. He nearly tripped over Ra'uf, who had been lying on top of one of Austin's T-shirts. Briana stared at her cat as Steve left and felt a rush of pain shoot up to her throat. She spent the rest of that day in bed.

The hint of sadness in her eyes needed no explanation. During his first year away, the immense labor involved in establishing a permaculture farm left Austin beat, so he only had to endure a few moments of agony before passing out each night. But as the second year wrapped up, his focus shifted to teaching. He hated the idea of being some kind of foreign Superman, as it clashed with his view that a country's prosperity lies in the ability of its people to sustainably grow their own food. But even a day's worth of walking lectures wasn't able to drain him of enough energy so as to not think of her.

He stumbled upon the Treehouse Inn one afternoon. The owner told him they were going out of business since ecotourism in the region had significantly slowed down. Austin immediately offered to buy him out, on one condition: "You have to teach me how to build a treehouse," he said.

Once Austin was done with that, he looked for other ways to occupy his time. He went to a Muay Thai camp where there were no bells to distract him. The only indicator he had to go by was the look of astonishment on the fighters' faces. They did this for a living, so when they started gathering around his heavy bag, he figured he was getting close. But just as he was nearing his goal of total exhaustion, the oldest coach he had ever seen came up to him and broke his concentration.

"ผู้หญิง," barked the elderly man.

"What?" Austin asked, too tired to answer in Thai.

"ผู้หญิง," the old man continued. "ผู้ชายไม่ใช่ทำให้ คน บ้า ได้ เช่น ผู้หญิง." *Woman, nothing makes man crazy like woman.*

Austin chuckled as the old man crossed his hands behind his back and walked away. He decided that was enough training for one day, and proceeded to take off his gloves and shower. He had planned on staying for a week, but didn't make it past the first night when the owner's granddaughter snuck into his bed. Austin always carried a knife on him when he traveled, and the presence of an unfamiliar body was enough to set off his instincts. That was how he found himself holding a blade just centimeters away from the young woman's throat.

Austin caught a glimpse of himself, manic and dripping with

sweat, in her panic-stricken eyes. He immediately got off of her and flung the knife across the room. He buried his face in his hands, but couldn't hide the fact that he had almost slit an innocent woman's throat: not because of who she was or what she had done, but because of who she wasn't and could never be to him.

"I'm sorry," she blurted out in Thai.

"It's not your fault," he exhaled deeply.

The next morning he went to announce his departure to the Prime Minister. She asked if there was something wrong with his accommodations. He assured her they were fine. "My heart's just not in it anymore," he confessed.

He spent the rest of the flight contemplating how sustainable it was for him, of all people, to have his heart beating inside of another human being.

"Have you seen your dad?" she prompted after what seemed like an eternity.

"Yes."

"How is he?"

"Not great. He asked me to buy him a gun for Christmas."

"Why?"

"He's been diagnosed with lung cancer and he hates hospitals, almost as much as he hates pity, so he's hoping I'll assist in his wolf's suicide."

"What are you talking about?" she implored.

"When a wolf thinks he's no longer useful, he goes off on his own," he explained. "It's certain death because he knows he can't survive without the pack."

"And what did you say?"

"I told him the pack still needs him," he answered with a half-smile that made her realize there were more courageous things than battling Monsanto. "Do you mind if I used your bathroom?"

"Go ahead," she replied, her head still spinning from the information he had divulged.

Not two minutes had passed before she heard him yell out from her bedroom: "Hey! Come here!" Briana rushed out of the living room, despite her bedroom only being five feet away.

"What is it?" she asked.

He held two delicate amber earrings up to her face. "It takes the glass blowers in Thailand an entire month to finish one pair. I want you to have them."

"They're gorgeous," she said. "I don't even know what to say."

"Thank you works."

"Thank you. I'm sorry I didn't get you anything," she added.

"It's all right," he affirmed, handing her the earrings. "You can blow me something now."

She scoffed, but Austin's eager lips cut her laughter short.

At first, they were met with resistance but this only encouraged him and he pulled Briana toward him with the same delicacy you'd expect a bull to enter a china shop with. The sensation of his bulge against her crotch caused her body to betray her, and a moan parted from her lips, giving his tongue the opening it craved. It found hers in no time, and soon they were mingling like acrobats. She dropped the earrings on the floor as she reached for his neck.

Her fingers traced his upper back until they found a suitable piece of flesh to dig her nails into. He managed to undo her jeans and pull them down past her butt without ever leaving her mouth. Then he readjusted himself and started teasing her pussy relentlessly, alternating between circling her clit with his thumb and penetrating her with his index and middle finger. This combined with the pressure of his cock against her thigh nearly sent her over the edge, but she didn't want it to be over yet.

Austin sensed her hesitation and proceeded to stick his cum soaked fingers in her mouth. She took pleasure in sucking each of them dry, like a mad woman with no shame. Then she began to caress his shoulder while her other hand attended to his bulge. He loved getting jerked off, even though he couldn't feel anything. Or so she thought before she unbuckled his pants and realized this wasn't a case of severe phantom phallus after all. He wasn't wearing a harness. She followed the base of his dildo not back to his pubic bone, but to his cunt. She spit out his fingers and looked at him incredulously, visibly angry at the fact that he had taken this step without consulting her. He rolled his eyes in negation as he loosened her grip on his dick, and then he completely removed her jeans and underwear before following suit.

"Get on your knees," he said.

"Excuse you?"

"Do you want to see it or not?" His arousal made him impatient.

"Yes," she declared.

The Feeldoe had been around for years, but she wasn't the type to sit around and surf the web for sex toys. She considered herself straight: the only pussy she liked was attached to a man, and it came complete with a two-inch monster clit, that was now obstructed by

this weird contraption. Her curiosity got the better of her, though, and she lifted the underside of this strange device to see how it worked. That simple motion made him tilt his head back, and it wasn't long before she established a rhythm. Then it dawned on her how incredibly wet he had to be to fit this inside his hole. She started stroking her pussy at the thought.

The sight of her masturbating made him take off his shirt. She was about to give him a blow job when he picked her up off the floor in one fell swoop, fearing that if he got any wetter his dildo might slip out. She presumed he was going to fuck her standing up, but his arms didn't stop until her pussy was right over his mouth. She knew he wasn't going to drop her, but being eaten out this high off the ground still made her nervous, and so she was relieved when he only licked her a few times before yelling, "Brace yourself!"

Briana landed on all fours, her pussy still in reach of his tongue. He wasted no time putting it to use. Flood the Mississippi? More like unleash Niagara Falls, she thought to herself as he ate her out.

She had had a recurring dream while he was away: He'd be planting seedlings in a field somewhere when all of a sudden she'd walk up to him with a coconut in her hands. She'd raise it up to his lips, and he would feverishly drink it until the water ran down his neck. Knowing that she was fulfilling a need as primitive as thirst itself sent shivers down her spine and filled her with a sense of satisfaction so great that she found herself dragging her pussy down his torso and leaving a trail of cunny juice in her wake.

She was about to mount him backwards, but he slid in as soon as her pelvis was raised. His intentions made clear: he wanted to watch her as she came, a privilege he had not earned yet, at least not in her mind. But the intensity with which he grabbed her hips left no room for debate. Plus, it was hard for her to protest when she was this horny, and knowing he could feel everything that was going on made her ride him all the more enthusiastically.

At some point, he released the death grip on her waist and interlaced their fingers. This simple act of tenderness drove her to orgasm, and she buckled from the uncontrollable shaking.

She opened her eyes as the last wave of pleasure made its way through her, only to find herself face to face with his latest tattoo, the one he had gotten right before he left. Briana had seen this image on his laptop before: A Russian man, who resembled Rasputin, summoning a genie and a banner with the phrase *As you wish* underneath them. Except the tattoo over his heart had the

image inverted: the mystic was granting the wishes to a woman who looked exactly like her.

For once in her life, she didn't know what to do. She glanced at him, hoping for some clue on how to proceed. But all she got was a glimpse at their history, courtesy of the same dark pupils that had once belonged to the boy with the boobs and the bicycle, then to the young security officer who worked the night shift just so he could write stories about her, and now to the wise man who flew across the world to help a country in need.

Tears rolled down her cheeks as it dawned on her that although he had left, she had been the one who had checked out of their relationship. She tried covering them up with her palms of her hands, but that only made things worse, and soon she was sobbing intensely. Austin got up and wrapped his arms around her, pressing the side of his face against her stomach. His tears, despite Florida's record high temperatures, were the warmest thing she had felt in years. Her defenses crumbled underneath the weight of his uninhibited affection and she returned his embrace without reservation. They stayed like that for a while, until both of their insides were sore. Then Briana climbed off of him and lay on her side with her arm raised, a clear indication that she wanted to be spooned. He took out his member and did as she asked, feeling the weight of the world on his shoulders diminish, along with the space between them. All that mattered now was that he was home, and so was she.



HOW SHE IS AFTER WORK

FRANCES STEWART

HER VOICE WAS THE best part: in the new body, Lois sounded just as she did in her own head. Strange how much it mattered, but the first time she switched in, the first time she tried saying “Hi, my name is Lois,” the sound of it moved her to tears.

The rest was wonderful, too: having a *shape*, having curves and softness, having hair that felt right, and actual *eyes* to make contact with. She stared at herself in the mirror for a solid minute, just crying, and then she laughed out loud at herself, and then she cried again.

It came with a basic coverall, but she’d ordered decent clothes. She stripped the coverall off as soon as she switched in, then took a shower. Feeling the warmth of the water, *tasting* it, felt so good that she almost stayed home.

She pulled on the dress: royal blue, a good match against the pale skin. *My skin*, she thought. She brushed soft brown hair, delicately applied a bright lipstick, and put on silver ear and eyebrow rings. Then she slid on sandals and went out.

Everyone from her building liked The Actuator. Not the best or worst club in town, but one within staggering range of the corporate dorms if you were shitfaced. She’d gone once in her usual body—*my work body*, she corrected herself—and stood there voiceless, a heavy loader among smiling, laughing people with actual mouths to talk and ears to hear, with eyes instead of camera ports. In her new body, she actually felt her vocal cords tighten, her chest squeeze in sorrow.

She cried again in an alley, the kinesthetic presence of her emotions flooding her consciousness. No more steel spine, no more

empty casing full of echoes, no more nerveless, distant mechanism. When she finally calmed down, she touched up her lipstick and walked as smoothly and gracefully as she could manage.

The thump-thump of the club resonated in her chest a hundred feet away. She tweaked her ears—this body had a club mode—and went inside. Maanika was by the bar, chatting with Suresh and Jake and the rest of the crew. Maanika wore a brilliant rainbow sari, the one she'd been bragging about at work that morning, and her hair glowed under the club's black lights from something she'd put on it. Her hair looked like a galaxy: waves of light rode the masses of bouncing curls before fading into the rich, shiny black of its natural color.

Lois felt herself stop breathing. Her stomach fluttered, and her face warmed. *This is what it is to feel truly real.* For the first time since childhood, to have a body that was more than an awkward vehicle for her mind, to have her feelings resound so deeply ...

A whirlwind surged inside her: tears, amazement, anger, relief. Exultation won out. She set her jaw, walked to the bar, and took a stool.

Heads turned: Jake and Minoru first, then Suresh and his cronies. Then Maanika. In a room full of gaudy parrots, Lois's simple blue dress shone like a sapphire. She raised her hand and gestured to the bartender. At the edge of her vision, the gang from work watched her, chattering to one another. She smiled.

The bartender helped her pick a sweet drink with just a little fizz that warmed her as it went down. She lost herself in the bloom of sensation as the liquor spread into her belly, and then Suresh was at her elbow.

"Welcome, new face," he called over the noise of the bar. "Where've you been hiding?"

She glanced at him, but said nothing and turned back to her drink. Silence came easy after years as a heavy loader. And she knew Suresh.

"I can show you this club, yeah? Introduce you to the best people here!"

Lois laughed. It came out naturally, easily, like a flood of water.

"She has you *dialed*, dude," Jake called.

"Hey, come sit over here," Maanika said. "We'll protect you from that asshole!"

Lois smiled, but didn't get up from her stool.

Over the next ten minutes, her co-workers had moved from their

circle of seats to her end of the bar. Suresh sulked, and then he wandered off to chat with his club friends.

Jake joked. Minoru told stories. And Maanika asked questions. They all did.

"You work at the Plant? You do, don't you! What building? What department?" Lois discovered a power, a confidence in silence, in listening. Jake, Minoru, and Maanika wove their own story about her, taking each shake of the head, each smile or giggle as a sign. She was clearly not on their crew, but somewhere close, probably in management. A new hire, or a transfer from overseas.

Lois responded quietly and politely. She told them that this was a new body for her, that it was her first night out in it.

"Might as well have been made for you, darling," Maanika said. "You wear it perfectly." Lois smiled a wide, honest grin at that, and Maanika blushed, cheeks already rosy from alcohol glowing brightly. Her hair shimmered as she ducked her head to hide behind her hand.

Lois felt electrically alive, every nerve humming like guitar strings. The noise of the club—of Jake's bids for attention, of Minoru's fumbling flirtations—all faded. The world, all of it that mattered, shrank down to fit within Maanika's shining green eyes.

They talked: Maanika about fashion, with an energy that Lois found infectious, and Lois about her passion for music, especially soundtracks. Maanika smiled, touched Lois's shoulder, moved closer. They talked on, about the Company, about the Plant, about the pitiful state of the equipment.

Then they were heading outside to get some air. Then they were walking home, talking on the street, holding hands, leaning close for warmth. Lois felt only *now*, the beauty of the moment pushing aside fear and shame and memory and the coming day and even the next minute. She talked easily, with no need for a keyboard or speaker, no effort of thought, and Maanika listened. And when Maanika talked, Lois drank in her voice as if hearing her for the first time: the soft silkiness of her accent, the tiny note of uncertainty usually inaudible under layers of smug, posed confidence.

It felt like love at first sight. It felt like seeing the world with new eyes. Lois burst out laughing.

Maanika smiled. "What brought *that* on?" she asked.

"Oh, I just ... I never go to the club," Lois answered. "I had a *really* bad time there one night when I first started, and—" She shook her head. "I feel so sad. I almost didn't go tonight. I might

never have met you—really met you—if I hadn’t.”

Maanika blushed again and hid her eyes.

“It’s *true*,” Lois said. “I—I know I’ve seen you at work, but I really feel I’m seeing you for the first time. Without tonight—”

Maanika squirmed. “Stop! Seriously, you’re like something out of a movie. This whole night is.”

She looked into Lois’ eyes, her face still as water. Then they both snickered.

“You’re right about the club,” Maanika said. “And about Suresh.” She mimed taking off imaginary sunglasses, stared smokily at Lois, and said, “I can introduce you to the best people here, eh?” She waggled her eyebrows, and they both dissolved into a fit of giggling that left them leaning against the dormitory wall. The Company logo flashed above them on the bright LED wall panels, and shining products made at the Plant rotated behind it.

Maanika gently took Lois’ shoulders—in the new body, Lois no longer towered over her—and so they looked at each other eye to eye. Then Maanika slowly, carefully, leaned in and kissed her. Lois could smell her, the musk-and-coconut scent of her hair and skin, her sweat. She could feel warmth flowing from the kiss outward down to her toes, her fingers clutching Maanika’s waist, drawing her near to taste the tang of her lips, hear her pulse roaring in her ears.

She gasped as they parted, panting like someone coming up from black depths of water.

Maanika searched Lois’ face as she leaned against the wall like a drunk. “Wow—you kiss like it’s your first time in years!” Lois shivered and looked away.

“No, precious one, don’t,” Maanika whispered. “I’ve just … I’m not used to it, that’s all. It’s like you fell out of the sky or something!”

Lois looked up from under her bangs as Maanika’s finely shaped, perfect lips parted in a wondering smile. Her blood buzzed, and she nuzzled Maanika, lips sweeping lips. Maanika sighed, leaned into the kiss, and pressed her to the wall. The curves of their flesh struck lightning from one another where they touched. Maanika’s hand caressed her arm, slid down, lit a path of fire across her belly and then up her chest, her throat, her chin, cupping the kissing face, the gentle touch of fingertips chiming her like crystal.

“Would you like to come to my room?” Maanika asked.

They tumbled into the elevator together when it arrived, giggling like children. Maanika pushed the button for her floor, only one above Lois’ dorm, but worlds away until tonight. “The only reason

we go to that club is because nobody has a car," she said. "It's really an awful place."

Lois smiled. "It kind of is, isn't it?"

"Yeah—the only people there are from our plant, or people who want to work there. They can be pretty terrible."

The doors opened, and they stepped into the hallway together. "This one time," Maanika said, "our crew went down there, and ... well, there's this one guy who works in our building, a real mope."

Lois' mouth went dry.

"A big, burly heavy-lift body. I don't think he could afford another," Maanika continued, snickering. Lois' skin flushed, and her stomach knotted. "He was so cheap that his speaker was broken, but he wouldn't fix it. He'd just type like this—"

Lois dropped Maanika's hand, the pain like a knife in her heart, the life and joy running out of her. Maanika turned around. "What?" Lois could see her own shock reflected back in Maanika's face as the tears blurred her vision. Lithe and graceful even in her shame and rage, she turned and ran. She threw herself on the crash-bar at the stairwell and took the steps three at a time.

"Lois!" cried Maanika behind her. "Precious one, what did I say?"

One floor down, Lois yanked open the fire door and ran to her own apartment. She palmed her lock, but the ID light flashed red—her new hand-chip was not registered yet.

Lois sobbed and fumbled in her pockets for her ID badge. Behind her, the fire door slammed open again. "Lois!" Maanika gasped.

Lois slumped against her door, sobbing. Footsteps quietly approached her, and a warm hand settled on her back. "Lois, *please*—tell me what I did! Is this your place? Please, we'll go inside and talk."

Lois' jaw clenched, and the familiar icy distance quenched her tears. She stood up stiffly and turned to look at Maanika. "You want to go inside," she growled. "Yes. Yes, that's a good idea."

Maanika hesitated, but Lois picked up her badge and swiped it. She threw the door wide, strode to her bedroom, and flipped on the light. She could hear Maanika following her, heels clicking across the tile floor toward the bedroom door.

"Lois, if this 'little girl lost' thing was an act and you're just another cra—"

Maanika stepped into the room and fell silent. The heavy loader body squatted by the bed like a gargoyle, its recharge cables still

plugged in. The taped-over speaker grill looked even more pitiful from outside.

Maanika's face worked, her brow furrowing. "Lev?"

Lois' tears poured free again, the steel and distance gone. "This guy, you mean, right?" she said. "The typing guy? This cheap, stupid, ugly guy you know at work, whom you never *talk to* unless you need something moved, whom you treat like an idiot because you haven't bothered to ask *why*..."

Maanika's jaw was hanging. She shook her head, reached helplessly out as Lois stalked back and forth, fury flaming within her like a torch. She grabbed her picture off the dresser and thrust it at Maanika.

"*This* is me," she said. "That little boy in the picture. I was never happy. My dad hated my guts, and my mother let him. Dad tried to beat the stupid out of me again and again. I'd have run away, but they had me chipped—I could never have gotten far. And when I was old enough, my parents sold me to the Company. They *sold off* my body and made me pick a work body. But my parents took half the money. That meant I could only afford *one*."

Lois pointed at the gargoyle in the corner—boxy, inhuman, barely articulated, ugly, and genderless. "I bought *this* because I knew it was the only kind of work that would earn me enough. I took hazard pay—that's how the speaker got wrecked. I worked on teams other workers like me didn't want to work on. Teams like *yours*," she spat.

Maanika went gray.

"Yes," Lois said. "Your team has a reputation. You treat 'boxes' like me like *shit*. Did you even *ask* my gender?" She ripped the tape off her broken speaker grill. "You know, parts for these old models are hard to find. I was on the waiting list to repair my speaker when I joined your team. After a week, I took myself off. I saw no point in fixing it, or in talking to any of you after that night down at the club. Better to be the *machine* you treated me like."

"You've been banking it all," Maanika said.

"You're damn right. I've always *known* who I was. Not Lev—*Lois!* And tonight I went to the club again, to see how it felt. Just to be *me*, for one night, at least. And you were all there. And I wanted ... but ..."

Sorrow smothered her anger, and she dropped in a pile on the floor.

Maanika glanced down at the picture of Lois: the thin, scared, boy staring into the camera like a caged animal. She looked at Lois,

despairing on the floor. Then she kneeled.

"I won't make excuses. I've nearly ruined this. But now I can see it." She shook her head slowly. "You're in there, and you look more alive than anyone I've known."

She held out the photo like an offering. "I *see* you, Lois. And ... and you're *so* beautiful."

Lois took the photo. Her own sad, hopeless eyes looked back. She clutched the picture to her chest. The gargoyle towered over her in its corner. But beside her, Maanika waited, a single word away. She caught her breath through ragged sobs, and then she opened her mouth again to speak.

OCEAN CALLING HOME

ANDI GRACE

MORNING SUN BEATS DOWN on the wide-open beach. Davy climbs into his lifeguard chair, looks out across the beach, and pulls down the brim of his red cap, slathering zinc-white sunscreen across his skin. He looks up and down the beach. It's quiet: the beginning of his shift is most people's breakfast time, sooner than the day camps, later than the worn-out revelers staggering home carrying their fancy shoes.

In the distance, sea gulls are gathering, mewling and pecking and flying away. He wonders if a seal has washed up on shore. He worries that kids or overeager selfie-stick toters might not make the most sound decisions with the seal's body, so he wanders down the beach to see what's happening.

As he gets closer he notices the shape of a body, a human body.

He starts to run, as fast as he can, toward the man washed up on shore. He drops to his knees, gulls flying into the distance as he places his hands onto the naked man's worn out body. The man is curled up in the fetal position, and Davy places his fingers to the man's throat listening for a pulse. It's faint, but detectable. He turns the man on his back and tilts the man's head away from his chin.

He listens for breath.

His breathing: *it sounds like the ocean.*

Clearly this man is tired and beat up, but he's alive. He's okay. Suddenly Davy feels awkward and unsure of himself. He's caught off guard by how handsome this man is. His nakedness. His mysterious appearance on the beach, as if he had washed up on shore from some long lost tropical island, a mystical, mirage-like existence, blooming

in the middle of the sea.

The man begins to wake up, his eyes blinking, sand falling down his face between his eyelashes. Davy wants to touch his face and wipe the sand from his sunkissed cheeks, but he resists, caught between caution and desire. Davy lifts the man up onto his lap, one hand beneath his back, the other in his hair holding up his head.

"Are you okay?" he asks the man.

The man looks back up at him, blinking and starting to smile.

There is silence as Davy holds the man, waiting for an answer. The silence rests easy in the waves. Eventually he asks, "I'm Davy. What's your name?"

The man begins to open his mouth as if to speak, but no sound comes out. He looks down, touches his throat, then looks back up at Davy. He puts his hand up to Davy's heart. They look into each other's eyes and get lost in the sound of the waves falling across the sand. Suddenly Davy is struck anew by the man's nakedness, the feeling of his hands across the man's skin.

He takes his hands out from underneath the man's head and back, resting him back gently across the beach. "I'll be right back," he says.

He runs back to his lifeguard chair and grabs his second pair of swim trunks to bring back to the man washed up on shore. As he slips on the trunks, he notices that the man has fishing line sewn neatly along his torso, all the way around, as if his body were two parts sewn into one. He slips on the shorts and rest his hands on the man's belly. The man reaches for Davy's hands and moves them to his heart.

They sit on the beach like that, as the sun keeps beating and the waves keep rolling over and over onto the sand.

**

Davy opens the door to his apartment and walks the man inside. The man's left arm is draped over Davy's shoulder, Davy's right arm around his waist. Davy carefully places the man on his couch. The man slips as he lands and starts to cough. Davy pats his back more and more firmly as the coughing continues, his breath wheezing.

Something is caught in his throat.

The man reaches into his mouth and begins to pull out a piece of thin, tattered fabric. Davy watches, eyes wide, unsure how to help. He holds his hands out flat below the man's mouth, receiving the fabric in awe. Eventually the fabric is fully out of his mouth, and

the man takes a deep breath and unfolds it. It's thin worn canvas, like a piece of an old sail. They read the fabric together. *Rán.*

"That's my name" the man says. "I'm Rán."

"It's nice to meet you, Rán," Davy says uncertainly. "How ... how did you end up on the beach?"

Rán looks down at his hands, crumples the fabric, and looks back up and around the room. "Is this your home?" he asks, looking back at Davy. "Thank you for bringing me here."

Their eyes meet. Davy places his hand on Rán's knee. "You're welcome, Rán." He touches Rán's face, gently running the backs of his fingers over small fresh cuts and bruises on his cheek. "Do you want to go to the hospital? I probably should have offered to take you there. I just ... I don't know what came over me. For whatever reason, I felt it would be better to bring you here, that you'd want that. Is that crazy?"

"I would rather be here. Thank you," Rán offers. He looks around the room quizzically, touching surfaces with his fingertips. "Can I have some water? How does water make its way to your home, Davy?"

Davy brings Rán a glass of water. Rán drinks it, quickly. His face twists in slight confusion and awe as he drains the glass. He pulls the empty glass away from his face and clutches it in his hands on his lap. He touches it tenderly and exhales deeply before he places it back in Davy's hand.

Their fingers touch lightly, and they pause and look at one another, both breathing.

"Rán, can I ask you something?" Davy says. "This might be kind of a strange question, but where did you come from?"

Rán looks out the window towards the ocean and points. "The man in the whale's belly sent me here." He looks back at Davy, smile in his eyes.

"Who's the man in the whale?" Davy asks. "Why did he send you here?"

"To understand you," Rán says. "I just want to understand you. He told me that if I could understand you, I could find the answers."

"What do you want to understand" Davy asks. "Did the man in the whale sew you together like this?" Davy reaches to Rán's waist and touches the fishing line sewn in perfectly equal strokes across his waist.

"He did. So I could walk, like you." Rán touches his waist too, and he walks his fingers until he's holding Davy's hand. "I wanted to be a man, like you. So I could answer the questions. Everyone

I love is in a lot of pain right now. I tried to leave them because of how much we were all hurting. I miss them.”

Davy looks back at Rán, takes a deep breath, and lifts his hands above his chest. “Take off my shirt,” he says. Then he smiles as Rán lifts Davy’s shirt above his head, revealing scars running warming lilac across his chest, cupping his heart like hands in prayer. “This is part of how I learned to be a man,” he says, looking back at Rán.

Rán’s eyes are wide. “You made yourself? You sewed yourself back together, like me? Did you also have a broken heart?”

“Yes,” says Davy. “I think in some ways I still do.”

He was surprised by how much he was willing to tell Rán, but somehow he felt that Rán could hold it. It felt safe. Touching Rán, looking in his eyes, made Davy feel like he was surrounded by a warm pool of water: safe and relaxed and able to let go.

“I don’t know why I’m telling you this,” says Davy.

“I want to listen. I want to learn,” says Rán. “Can I touch the places where you sewed yourself back together?”

“Yes,” says Davy.

Rán lifts his hands to Davy’s chest. He holds Davy’s heart in his hands and feels his heart beating. He leans forward to kiss Davy’s neck. Davy exhales, deeply. He melts into the couch, smelling the ocean in Rán’s hair, running his hands through it as Rán discovers the terrain of his body, kissing his chest and arms and belly, slowly, like gentle waves lapping across a stone clutched shore. Finally, Rán falls to his knees in between Davy’s legs. He places his hands on Davy’s red shorts and looks up at him.

“Will you let me taste you?”

“I ... Rán,” Davy begins. “I don’t know if I’m the kind of man you are expecting.”

“Davy, I want you taste *you*. I won’t if you don’t want me to. But I wonder—will you let me?”

Davy holds in his breath slightly as he places his hands on the couch on either side of his tense body. “Okay.”

Rán pulls down Davy’s shorts, tossing them through the air behind him once they’re free of Davy’s ankles. Davy’s knees fall together until Rán places his hands on his knees, not forcing but not backing away, and finally Davy exhales and lets his knees fall to the side.

“You see—I’m not the kind of man you were expecting.”

Rán’s eyes grow wide, caught in the most pleasant of surprises. “No, Davy, you are so much more.” Rán reaches up and touches

Davy's face gently, rising up but still on his knees. "There is an ocean between your legs, Davy. I can't imagine any place I'd rather be."

Tears fall down Davy's face as Rán touches down Davy's belly. He gently dives his hand between Davy's legs, melting into the wetness, getting lost in the rain.

Eventually Davy stands up, lifting Rán up in his arms. Rán's body cocoons, safe and dark and warm.

Davy walks Rán to his bed and places him there gently, allowing him to unfold. Davy crawls across Rán's body, kissing him all the way from the bottom of his toes until he reaches his face, holding his head with his hand until they roll to their sides, holding each other, running their hands across each other's bodies. Each left with one free hand to call each other home. They stroke and touch and breathe in waves, looking into each other's eyes, sucking on each other's fingers and kissing away each other's tears.

Eventually Rán sits up against the headboard and brings Davy's body over his, with Davy's legs spread wide. Rán slips his fingers inside Davy, beckoning him to come home. Davy moans and drapes his body across Rán's chest, hands clinging to the walls.

Davy lowers his body onto Rán's, accepting him, letting go completely. They wrap their arms around each other's bodies, breathing and undulating like a long lost heartbeat. Davy holds Rán's hair like a life raft, breathing and rising and exhaling and letting go, melting away.

And in that moment they feel whole enough to come apart completely, like the ocean in a storm. They both come hard, hard enough to call ghosts home, to lay debts to rest.

They fall asleep like that: clutched by each other, lying peacefully in a perfect nest. Breathing. Gilled. Safe from the waves.

**

In the morning, the sun falls across the bed, gently asking Davy to rise. He yawns and reaches out, stretching. He hopes there's a body left to touch. To call home.

But there's nothing. There's no one.

He sits up slightly and looks around the room. "Rán?" he calls. There's no answer. No shuffling footsteps. No warm coffee smell.

Davy falls back into the bed. He dives his arms deep into the comforter and collects all the lost and found pieces of fabric he can find. And he cries. He breathes and prays with abandon. He holds

the blankets and pillows as close to his loneliness as he can afford.
And he waits for footsteps that never come.

**

Months later, while walking on the beach, Davy finds a bottle resting quietly on the open shore. It's made of clear glass with a cork top that pops open when he presses gently.

In the bottle there's a tightly coiled note. Davy pulls it free and looks around from side to side before he looks out on the ocean. A tear gathers and falls to the beach, swallowed by the latest wave. He walks a few feet back and sits in the dry sand. He unrolls the paper.

Sweet Davy,

I'm so sorry that I left you that morning. You can not imagine the anguish I carry in my heart. I wish that you were with me here. I think about you every day.

I've gone back home. To the ocean. To the man in the whale's belly. I needed him to sew me apart and back together again. I needed to get my fin back. I can't imagine what it would mean to still be onshore with you, but I dream about it. Please know that I dream about it.

I want to tell you the story of how I met you.

The man in the whale's belly helped me come ashore. He sewed legs to my body so I could walk with you. I don't think he ever expected that I would touch your face and swim in the ocean between your legs, but I am so glad I did.

Please know, I treasure every moment I spent swimming with you.

I hope I did not break your heart. I take comfort in knowing you could sew it back together again, even if I did. That comfort keeps me breathing.

I hope you're breathing too.

Know that I will always be here. And that you can always sew yourself back together. Because you can.

Please know you can.

And I want you to know, Davy, that the ocean is getting warmer each day, and with this warming everyone I love is drowning. You might not be able to understand how an ocean creature could drown simply in warm water, but we can. And we are. I am losing friends every day, and my heart is breaking.

The man in the whale's belly found me when I was swimming, lost in the waters on my way to shore. I just wanted answers, and I didn't want to see my friends in pain anymore, coughing up plastic with their last breath. Caught in nets, pulled up above the water's crest and cast

back down again, dismembered. That's when the whale swallowed me up, and I thought I was gone.

I was happy, I have to be honest. I wanted to let go and just give up. I've lost too many that I love. They drown. They grow useless extra eyes and caustic bumps on their gills and their bellies. Do you know what it's like to touch someone you love whose body has grown toxic?

But in the whale's belly, the man sits beneath a lamp, and he lights up the darkness. He puts you back together with all the broken pieces he's gathered in the tides. He makes you whole again.

The man in the whale's belly sent me to shore to find out why the humans cast so much away. As if your cast-offs could disappear. As if everything were not endlessly connected.

We want you to know, sweet Davy, that we can not hold all of this for you—you humans. We are not endless. We need to breathe too. Maybe you forget that, my love. But we do.

We are not endless. We cannot endlessly catch your pain, your loneliness, or your sense of non-belonging. And even though we love you, what we need most is for you to love yourself. To find home in your bodies. To find respite in the earth and to breathe like letting go will set you free.

Remember my sweet Davy, that I will always cherish swimming in your ocean. I hope you will cherish it too. Your ocean runs deep. It's a gift that is meant to be treasured.

*Love always,
Rán.*

ACCOMMODATIONS

SHAWNA LOGUE

THE DOOR TO RALAK'S home was guarded. Takrash should have expected it, given Ralak's sedition and treason charges, but she hadn't. Two of the Fleet's young cis women, neither of them reaching Takrash's chest, were posted to either side of the sliding mechanical doors. Takrash rubbed the silver burncaps that prevented her tusks from rapidly regenerating, mildly concerned.

"Sorry, *sir*," said one of the women rudely, leveling her railgun. "No visitors allowed." Takrash wasn't sure if the soldier knew she was a woman and chose rudeness, or if she was making assumptions based on Takrash's nine foot frame. *At the moment, it doesn't matter*, she thought as she sighed and snatched the rifle out of the woman's hands faster than she could blink. She was careful not to break the sound barrier with her movements, though. She didn't want to draw attention.

Predictably, the young soldier drew her sidearm. With forced calm, Takrash crushed the assault rifle between her massive hands as though it were cheap ceramic, leaving both guards slack-jawed. She did it carefully to avoid cutting her hands: she would have regenerated the wounds in moments, of course, but she wanted to project invincibility.

"It's Miss, or Madam," she said coldly, brushing the pulverized fragments from her hands like mere dirt.

"That was nanodiamond," whispered the young soldier who had not blocked her path. "It's unbreakable." Her tone was awed and not a little afraid.

Takrash was happy to avoid a fight. She knew her strength had

always intimidated others. Whether that strength was due to her link to the Goddesses, the result of fighting adults to stay alive since her ninth birthday, or being able to summon more rage in battle due to her horrific past, though, she'd never known for certain.

"Anything can be broken," she said. "This wasn't even difficult. I have no intention of helping Ralak escape, and even if I did he doesn't want to. For whatever fool reason, he trusts your Fleet's justice. Now move."

Both women slowly and begrudgingly stowed their weapons. One of them buzzed the intercom to let Ralak know he had a guest.

Despite the rudeness, Takrash realized as she stepped through the doors that the interruption had been welcome. She'd arrived far too quickly to feel ready. *Then again, she reminded herself, you could have spent every day since you killed your father preparing, and you still wouldn't be ready. Not for this.*

The living room she entered was well maintained and had a certain military precision to it. The room was a life told in objects: a variety of rifles and plasma cannons of various makes and models, moving holograms of Ralak with the half-his-size women who made up his Fleet crew, and a wraparound couch that faced a wall with dozens of different news programs playing silently. A few of them even mentioned her.

They also mentioned Karak-krul, her homeworld, where the wondrous and disturbing technologies she drowned in, both here on Herelmak and throughout Hegemony systems, did not even exist. That attention worried at her. She didn't like the Hegemony's greedy eyes on her home.

The Commander joined her from another room, carrying drinks. "You look nervous," Ralak said, sitting on the couch and putting down the drink tray. "Sit down. The drinks are light—not orcish. They've got alcohol, but the day a human whiskey makes me drunk is the day I'll retire from Fleet."

"You might not get to retire," she said softly, taking one of the tumblers and sipping at it. It had a mild, gentle flavor of peat. The alcohol didn't affect her, of course. "Because of me."

Ralak's face went from gently pained to stony in a moment. "No," he said. "Because I made tactical decisions to protect Fleet and Hegemony star systems, decisions I stand by. I took initiative. Now it's up to them to decide if I went too far."

"How much longer until the trial?" Takrash asked. "I can't stay indefinitely. I have to return to Earth by week's end. Hopefully my

new partner can turn up enough firepower to save it from itself."

"Or to turn it into space dust," Ralak countered. Takrash didn't flinch: unlike the Hegemony's orcs, Takrash hadn't gotten to hit buttons to kill armies. Karak-kkul had no missiles, no guns. Orbital superiority was not a familiar term there. She'd done it with melee weapons and sometimes her bare hands, watched the people she'd killed scream out for their mothers. What the Hegemony called war sickened her.

Ralak continued. "The trial concludes in a week. They'll call you in three days. We should really be going over what you'll say in testimony. That's what my advocate suggested we use this time for."

"I'm going to tell the truth, as your custom claims to demand," Takrash said. "No matter who asks, even if it's not good for you or me, and especially if it's not good for them. If they do not like it, they are welcome to die trying to kill me like the rest."

"Which," Ralak said with an easy grin, leaning back, "is what I expected and what I like about you. I always know where you stand. You think embracing subterfuge in our strategy spread like plague, right?"

"Of course it did. You can't start lying in one area and expect that the lies won't grow. Lies feed on themselves."

"You're not wrong, and you know I agree," Ralak said quietly. "Is that why we're here? To talk about that?"

"No," she said softly. "I'm not sorry, but I am done. I'm not here for that. I'm here for ..."

She found herself without the words, looking at him hopelessly.

"Something else," he finished after a long pause. "What is that, Takrash? I like you. You're a woman who's beyond merely impressive. I'd be proud to stand with you again in battle. But I'd like to know where *we* stand. What are we? On Earth, we agreed there was an attraction. Can it be anything more?"

"I can't give you an answer," she replied after a moment. "I don't know what we are either. It isn't you. You've done everything I could ask. I just don't know if I can see this working." She sighed, crossing her arms as she stood to pace the room. "It's not anything you didn't do, or did. It's what my father did."

Ralak remained silent, and Takrash found herself filling the silence in a rush. "It was bad, okay? I don't really want to talk about it. It's just that anything intimate with a man is difficult for me."

"You wouldn't be the first woman I'd been with who had past trauma," Ralak said softly. "We can go as slow or as fast as you

want. I just want to know if there's something between us at all."

Eyes widening, Takrash nodded. "Yes! Yes, I want you. This. But I'm not like those other women." She was surprised to find a pang of jealousy. "You were much stronger than them, not the other way around. Those women couldn't crush your spine or pull your head off during a moment of panic. There wasn't a question about whether you should keep a weapon bedside."

"You haven't met my exes," Ralak said, chuckling a little. Takrash deadeyed him until he sighed and spread his hands. "Bad joke, shouldn't have made it. You're right, okay? That's new to me, and I know you could kill me unintentionally. I could hurt you, too, though. It sounds like you're placing a lot of trust in me just by coming here. Right?"

"It's not coming here; it's the rest of it," she said. "I don't worry about going anywhere. Who's going to stop me?" She gave a short, harsh laugh. "No one. But I'm worried that I might do something I'll regret, that I'll hurt you because of something that was done to me a long time ago. I can't let that happen."

"So we won't," he said calmly, gently taking her left hand in both of his. "It's sweet that you want to protect me, but taking that risk is my choice. If it's something you're not able to confront, that's okay. I'll respect your choice. But you don't get to decide for me. I've faced greater risk for much less gain."

Takrash considered that for a moment, turning it around in her head, before nodding. "All right. I want it of my own accord, and you do too. That's enough." She managed a slight, crooked smile. "Slow, please? Maybe we could start with kissing. Even that's hard for me."

"May I ask why?" Ralak said. "It isn't an issue. I just don't want to hurt you."

"I like kissing just fine. I just hate my tusks, even with the caps." She laughed bitterly. "They're upsetting. Make me feel male. It's easy for the caps to bump up against your tusks, also—too much like tusk-dueling. Makes me shut down."

Ralak considered her words. "So I should avoid your tusks. That's not hard."

"How do you plan to kiss me, then?" Takrash grumbled. "They're right on my damn face! I mean, that's not your problem, it's mine. It just feels like I can't—"

She stopped as Ralak pressed his own great tusks against her neck, using them to tilt her head a bit to the side, careful to keep far from her own shaved-down nubs. She shivered as he kissed her

throat, soft but thorough.

"Like that," he said, breathing into her neck. He withdrew slowly from her. "I don't mind figuring out what you feel comfortable with slowly and going from there. That's wise. Did you like that?"

Takrash nodded a little, the tightly wound ball of iron cords in her chest loosening somewhat. "Yes. Let me think about it. I wasn't expecting things to go this way. I don't really know what I want." She frowned as she realized how true that was. Her entire life was in the service of others. The only thing she'd ever given herself was the right to be a woman. That choice had meant a million of her own people dead in a war, many by her own hands.

She'd been ready for negotiations, not supportive capitulation. "How did you expect this to go?" he asked, as though reading her mind. Of course, she mused, he could probably see it all on her face. She still gave herself away constantly with her unguarded expressions.

"I don't know," she admitted. "I've never done this before. Not sex; I've done that. Just all with women. It's not that I don't like men!" she hastened, and then she found herself annoyed at caring enough to rush to clarify. "I do. I'm just afraid." She spat the final word out, disgusted.

"If I were in your shoes, I'd take it slow, too," Ralak said. "Let's start with the basics. You said you don't like the remainders of your tusks touched while kissing. Is that all the time? What else do you think I should know?"

Takrash thought about it for a long time. Finally, she said, "Yes, it's all the time on the tusks. If we could just not refer to them at all, that would be best. I refer to my body as it should have been, not as it is. She winced as she spoke, hating to speak the words. "My dick is my clit. Call it that. Always. No exceptions. Don't touch it unless I specifically ask you to." She sighed, finding this at once much easier and harder than she'd expected. "My ass is my cunt. Same rules as on my clit. I don't like it from behind. It's too close to what happened to me. There might be more that I don't know yet. This is new to me."

"Sounds fine," Ralak said. "I have one question. Did you want me to ask for permission to do things I want? Or should I wait for you to ask for something you want?"

Her eyes widened as she realized that she hadn't considered that distinction. She mulled it for a minute. "No, just when I ask," she said. "I like the idea of you asking to fuck me, or touch me. I'm

just not there right now." She surprised herself with sudden tears, though she only let one or two sting their way clear of her eyes before cutting it off, furious with herself. "This must be awful. Look, I'm sorry. It's too much."

"Not for me. If it is too much for you," he added gently, "then I will stop at once. Is it?"

Takrash found her usual boldness as she stood, extending her hand for him to take. Her knees shook no more. "Bedroom?" she asked.

Ralak grabbed her hand and let her lead, his nod answer enough.

As she entered his bedroom, she pulled her dress over her head with surprising grace. Takrash wore nothing beneath it, had never seen the point. She could feel his eyes on her thickly muscled thighs.

When she turned, though, she saw that his attention had moved to the brutal and massive set of scar tissue that made up her entire chest and upper back. Her father's "gift." Ralak looked up to meet her eyes quickly when she turned, not staring, but she still felt like curling in on herself.

Orcs didn't usually scar as adults: they either regenerated without scars, or injuries killed them outright. Only as children and old ones did they scar, and they rarely scarred badly, since orcs defended their children ferociously. Now Ralak knew why all of her dresses went to just below her throat. How young she'd been. She looked down, unable to meet his eyes. His gaze hurt worse than the torture had.

"May I kiss them?" Ralak said softly. "The scars, I mean." His voice was not disgusted; it was almost reverent. Takrash looked up at him, and then she nodded.

His lips were gentle against her throat, and then her knotted, scarred chest, his tusks brushing lightly against the ruin of her breasts. He put a cautious hand around her muscled waist, and when she gave a pleased gasp, he pulled her close. She allowed it. They both knew he couldn't move her an inch otherwise. "You're gorgeous," he said, and she noticed his wandering eyes admiring her thick arms now.

"I'm naked and you're not," she said, managing a smile. "Seems unfair. Easily corrected, though. If you want?"

He laughed and started to unbutton his Fleet uniform. It had a multitude of buttons, she noted; nine and a half feet of them. "Do you have more than one of those?" she asked. He nodded, clearly confused. Her grin broadened, and she tore the shirt off him as though it were cheap paper. The pants and underclothes took no longer.

He kissed her throat fiercely again, and then her scars, down her stomach to her outer thighs. She was surprised to find the tension leaving her. It had been difficult to get to this point, and now it seemed strange that things would feel so natural.

Ralak put a hand above each of her shoulders, looking down at her. "What would you like to do?" he asked softly. "I need to hear you say it out loud."

"I want you inside me," Takrash said. "Slowly, though. Fingers first. As gently as you can imagine, then twice as gentle."

Nodding, Ralak reached over to the side of the bed and pulled out a bottle from the drawer, which opened of its own accord as he reached for it. Takrash found herself briefly distracted by that technological wonder; when her focus returned, it was to the feeling of him rubbing her cunt gently with the lubricant. He didn't push even a single finger inside yet, just relaxing her. Still, he never let his fingers brush her clit, even accidentally.

Takrash moaned softly and felt herself untensing further, hard knots of tightness she hadn't even known were there uncoiling themselves inside her. She felt Ralak's first finger push into her: slow and gentle, just as she'd asked, to the first knuckle, and then over the course of minutes to the second. She let out something between a growl and a whimper, feeling herself open for him, loving every minute of it.

He took her with excruciating slowness. Then, patiently and steadily, she felt him pull his finger halfway out. Carefully, he pushed it back in, a lustful grin creasing his features when she let out a breathless gasp. He kept fingering her as he leaned over, increasing the pace every few minutes whenever he felt her relax enough.

"Do you want a second finger?" he asked when her hips started pushing back to meet the first one. Takrash nodded, feeling suddenly strangely shy as she flushed a deep emerald. He put his fingers together, slightly bent, and started to push both into her with that same steady, careful slowness.

Ralak was over top of her, looking down at her, as she felt herself tighten around him. He stopped for a moment there, letting her relax, waiting until he felt her calm again before continuing. The first two knuckles sank into her, and then the rest of the finger, giving her time to breathe and relax each time. Before long, he had repeated the careful process of opening her up, and she was pushing her hips back at him again, groaning loudly and trying to get both fingers deeper inside her.

Then, suddenly, it all fell apart. Something about the angle of his fingers, a moment of pain, and she was no longer in the room with Ralak. She was with her father, and it was that day.

She clenched hard, panicked, screamed. *Nonononono don't do this please don't not this please just kill me give me an honorable death but not this nononono*

"Takrash!" Ralak said urgently, his fingers trapped inside her. She could feel his bones cracking, and she knew she was close to breaking his fingers off inside her, quite literally. "We can stop right now," he said. "But I need you to relax enough for me to pull myself out."

She managed it, breathing deep just long enough for him to pull his hand free. Then she crawled back and away from him onto the bed, drawing herself into a fetal ball and sobbing like a child. She was alone and afraid.

Suddenly, Ralak was there again, speaking, and she started in surprise.

"Should I go?" he asked. "Whatever you need, Takrash. I'm sorry I hurt you. It's fine if you can't answer now. In that case, I'll stay here and be silent until you can tell me what you need."

He was standing again. Edge of the bed. Away from her.

The peace and calm in his voice helped. She could feel her heartbeat, fast, hard. Getting slower. Fists unclenching. She looked around the room, saw how very different it was than the day with her father, the viewscreens and the metal and plastic everywhere. She forced herself to take a slow, deep breath.

"It's better," she managed finally, forcing herself to sit up with her back against the headboard of the bed and look over at Ralak. His expression was blatant concern. He was holding his right hand with his left, too, seemingly without realizing it. "Are you hurt?"

"Some broken fingers," he said with a quick grin. "Nothing that won't regenerate in an hour or two. Definitely not something to worry about." The grin disappeared instantly, and the concerned look was back again. "Are you all right? I didn't mean to do that. I'm sorry; I thought I was checking in enough."

"You were!" she rushed, and then the tears started again. "You were. It's me! I don't know why you bother. I'm dangerous. I'll hurt you. I should stick to having relationships with other women. They don't make me freak out like this." She could feel the hitch in her throat. Crying wanted to be sobbing, but she wasn't doing that again. Refused. Yet the tears didn't stop.

"Takrash, I chose it. May I sit on the bed?" She hadn't noticed

he'd ceded it to her until he'd spoken. "I don't want to make you feel uncomfortable. Would that feel safe for you?"

She nodded once, staccato. He sat next to her. "I knew this might be a little dangerous, with your strength and the trauma you faced. It's okay. I wanted this, and I still do. I wasn't upset by what happened. I'm more worried about you." She felt him tighten his grip on her hand just enough to call it a squeeze.

"Why?" she snuffled, annoyed with herself. She had lain waste to armies! Why was this so difficult? She'd killed her father herself, and buried him after beheading the corpse to make sure he was gone. She'd slain gods, even a dragon! She feared no one. So why did something like this scare her? Why was the mere memory of what he did to her enough to make her a child again? "There's no reason to worry. None of *my* bones got broken."

His voice was kinder than she felt she had a right to. "No, your bones weren't broken. But those scars don't lie. My fingers will heal in no time. What happened to you was something unendurable. It won't ever stop hurting you. I knew that when I signed on. It doesn't make me want you less."

"I want to just be able to fuck you without having a complete breakdown," Takrash admitted. "I want to not feel like a child again every time you touch me, like at any moment something terrible is going to happen to me and the people I love."

"I can't give you that," Ralak responded. "But I can be patient. I'd like to be, if you'll let me. We can take our time figuring this out."

"Unless you get executed," she said.

"Unless I get executed," he agreed. "Or if you die going back to try to save that shitheap Earth. Or if I die in a space elevator accident, or whatever deaths might befall us."

"So we don't have much time left, potentially." Takrash sighed. "I think that's why I'm frustrated and angry about all this. Who knows if we'll get to do this ever again? And even knowing that, I can't stop myself from crying about being fingered." Those tears again, though this time they were slower and without sobbing.

"I enjoyed it until it hurt you," Ralak reminded her. "I'd like to do it again. That, and whatever else you want to do and feel comfortable doing."

Takrash took a deep breath. "Then let's. I don't know if I can stop crying, but I think I can avoid hurting you. If you wanted to try again when your bones knit. Would that make it creepy? To just cry the whole time?"

"It's fine," he said softly "as long as it's what you want. When it stops being that, tell me, and it's over. Always."

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It took another hour and a half for his bones to reknit, something they both knew took her a minute at most. They talked quietly, taking the time they would not have later to learn about each other. She wanted to know everything.

He flexed his hand occasionally during their talk, testing to see if the pain was gone. "Ready, if you are," he finally said.

When she nodded, he began rubbing her cunt gently again, not taking for granted that he could pick up where they'd left off. But it proved unnecessary: this time, she was rising to meet the first finger in a minute, her face twisting in pleasure as she did. The second finger took a little longer, but not much.

"Yes," she whispered intensely, pulling his head down to kiss her neck as he pumped both digits in and out of her. "More."

Ralak stopped slowly. "Another finger?" he asked. "Or do you want to try something bigger?"

Takrash had paid little attention to Ralak's own lust, but now that she was paying attention, it was impossible to miss how hard he was. "Can I kiss it?" she asked. He groaned and nodded, and she leaned forward, kissing his dick softly at the head, tasting him with a slow flick of her tongue.

She was more than gentle. As someone who had flattened buildings with careless gestures, she had to be. Cautiously, delicately, she sucked on the head of him before taking him further into her mouth, then further still, running her tongue along the underside, carefully twisting her tongue around the head, teasing the glans. She realized that she wasn't even thinking about her tusks at all. This was very unlike kissing.

He was big. Thick, too. Still, she wanted to see how deeply she could take him. She pushed forward again, felt a slight gagging sensation, and pushed past it to take him into her throat a little more before choking a little and pulling back. His deep moans and the way he twisted her hair in his desperate, grasping fingers let her know that it was appreciated.

She let his cock slip from her mouth, and then she laughed. It was a deep, thundering sound, and she hadn't had many reasons to use it lately. Ralak raised an eyebrow.

"I'm happy," she said, smiling still. "It feels strange."

Ralak's face softened, though the rest of him certainly didn't. He reached down, rubbing her cheek with his hand, steering clear of her tusks. "I am, too."

Wrapping her right hand around his shaft, she slipped it over the head and then back down, smiling up at him. His continuous mix of grunts and low groans pleased her. "I think I'm ready, now," she whispered huskily, pulling back and away from him on the bed.

Crawling until he was atop her, Ralak locked eyes with Takrash. "Are you sure? You're ready?"

She nodded, reached down. Stroked him a little more. "Slow, again. Really, really slow."

He pressed the head of his cock against her cunt, and she could tell he was forcing himself to be patient. That had been easier, she was sure, when it had been his fingers; now, every nerve ending in his body must have been screaming at him to rush forward. But he waited.

Takrash hooked her ankles around the small of his back and gave the smallest of pushes, inviting, welcoming, and he slid the head in entirely. She took deep breaths through the occasional gasps until he was able to push in another inch. Then another, still painless. And another. She felt him grind against her suddenly, and realized with surprise that he was entirely inside her now. He'd seemed too big for that to be possible, yet here they were. She wondered how other, much smaller orcish women handled it.

Ralak braced himself on the bed — she felt his hand just above and behind her head. Then he pulled out, nearly all the way, before pressing back into her. She felt herself give in to what was happening. It was finally the way she'd wanted all along: with a worthy and patient man. She had met many worthy women, and many who had also been patient with her. But she'd never met a man who was both.

She felt him tense all over, knew what was coming. She urged him on, whispered "Thank you, please, cum inside me," in his ear before he even had the chance to ask her. More than one of her sisters who'd been with men had told her that making the request usually helped it to be met. Given the way Ralak leaned his head against her shoulder, kissing her scar, his thrusting growing more erratic, she thought they were probably right.

Then she felt him flood her. She didn't cum with him, didn't really want to; she enjoyed instead the feeling of triumph as he continued to grunt in her ear, finishing his last thrusting spasms and then

staying inside her, kissing her along the throat and the chest again. He whispered his affection to her, softly, between the kisses.

**

Hours later, after Takrash had gone to sleep, Ralak found himself staring at the different news feeds on his living room wall. Public opinion was against him, he knew, and ubiquitous surveillance technology in a military society meant that no meeting was private. Takrash hadn't realized that the entire Hegemony already knew she'd come to visit him, or how that would look, in his case, to the prosecution.

He sighed and turned off the viewscreens, leaving the room in darkness. As he slipped back into bed next to Takrash, he wrapped an arm around her waist. She half-woke, smiled a little at him, and then nodded back into sleep in his arms. He gently kissed her temple, eliciting another sleeping smile. He knew what he might sacrifice for this night. It was worth it.

At least we'll face it together, he had time to think, and then sleep overtook him.

A BOY IN A BAR

ROCKET

IN HIS FANTASY, IT goes like this.

In his fantasy, when those uncompromising fingers circle his thigh, the boy doesn't panic, doesn't nearly levitate trying to scramble away, trying to keep his secret, to keep the bartender's possessive grip and fierce delight from turning into disgust when he discovers what's missing, that he's been tricked, that this hungry, willing boy is nothing more than a fraud. In his fantasy, he doesn't pull out of the bartender's grip and run out of the storage room, through the bar, half-blind with fear and trigger, into the street.

Instead, he spreads his thighs wider, lets the bartender's fingers course up his inseam until they shoot fire up his spine.

In his fantasy, he's not shy anymore, so he props one heel up on a crate and tips his head back and groans as the bartender grinds the heel of his hand into his cock.

In his fantasy, the bartender takes one look at him and *understands*. So he turns the boy over and presses his belly into the top of the keg and pulls his jeans to expose his round ass, and the boy can hear him making soft sounds of delight at the sight. And when his jeans are gone, the bartender doesn't have to kick his feet apart, because in his fantasy, he knows exactly how the bartender wants him and does it before he has to direct him.

And the bartender starts out with his hand, but he doesn't touch him like people touch girls, because in his fantasy, the bartender knows what he needs, being a boy, a boy who wants to be good, a boy with a body like this. And while he's cupping the boy's cunt, the bartender is bending over him so his body warms the line of the

boy's spine, and he's saying things into his ear that let him know that he knows what kind of boy he is and that it doesn't change anything, because in his fantasy, the bartender knows that boys like him sometimes need to be told that, especially when people are touching bodies that they're maybe used to treating differently.

And in his fantasy he's greedy for it, wiggling his ass back against the bartender's cock, feeling it hot against his tailbone even through layers of clothes, but even so, the bartender asks him. Not because he doesn't know, but because he wants him to have to say it, and because sometimes even the cockhungriest boy needs to feel like it's up to him.

So the bartender drags his cock s-l-1-l-o-w-w-w-l-y from the boy's tailbone down, across his ass, down the slickness of his cunt, against the boy's cock until their hips are flush against each other, and he leans down and presses his lips against the top vertebra just below the boy's neck, and he says, where would my boy like my cock? And in his fantasy, he says that he wishes the bartender could fuck him in all his holes at once, and in his fantasy, the bartender laughs and calls him a greedy slut, and then two more men come in from the bar, rolling up their sleeves and undoing their trousers, and they smile at the bartender who's saying: such a faggot, I should have known one cock would never be enough for him, and then he's begging, begging shamelessly because this is a fantasy, and in his fantasy he's not ashamed of how he wants to be filled up and rendered useless and helpless and made into a toy for all the cocks he can handle and then some.

So in his fantasy, one of them lets the boy straddle him, and he whispers *that's a good boy* when the boy sinks down on him so he knows that even though he's fucking a cunt, it doesn't change anything, and he grips the cheeks of the boy's ass and spreads them hard, so that another of them can kneel behind him and splay one long-fingered hand over his lower back and use the other to press his cock into his ass, and murmur something about how he is so good, taking it so well for them. And then the third of them combs his fingers through the boy's hair and brushes it off his face with something like tenderness, and then the fingers cup his jaw and his mouth just opens because in his fantasy, the boy knows exactly what to do to be good, and then the third cock is in his mouth and he's rolling his hips and the two voices behind and below him spit profanity, and he'd be moaning too except he's pulling the cock deeper into his mouth, holding his breath, just angling his hips

back and forth and sucking and he's inescapably speared and he's so happy he might just die.

As he thrums taut as an instrument string between the pinioning cocks, his own cock, the part that he calls his cock, slides over the pubic bone of the man he's straddling, over and over again, and the cocks pounding into him speed up until he's just rebounding between them, gasping and crying out around the cock fucking his throat. They're rocking him violently with thrusts so hard that the boy can feel that they don't care if they hurt him, but they're not hurting him.

In his fantasy, he's somehow still able to ask them, even though his mouth is utterly occupied: Please, Sirs, may I come for you? And he hears them consult with each other before telling him: No, greedy boy, not yet, and in unison they slow their strokes until he's descended a little, giving little whines through his nose, from the edge.

In his fantasy, he's not allowed to come until he's gotten all of them off first, so he works for it, serving with all his holes, pumping, whimpering and taking deep breaths through his nose to stave off the building orgasm.

In his fantasy, they all come at once inside him, drowning him, each jerking against him and flooding hotly in his holes and gritting things like *good* between clenched teeth, and their cocks would be softening and slipping out of him if this weren't a fantasy, but it is, so they keep fucking him harder than ever. Only after a nearly continuous stream of begging for harder is dripping out of his well-fucked mouth do they tell him that he's allowed to come if he can make a countdown.

They start at ten and trade off numbers so the countdown is circling his head, nine, eight, his orgasm is building and he desperately grinds his cock against the bartender's belly, seven, six, he hears himself saying, "Please, sir, sir, fuck my ass, please fuck me harder, I need it, I need it," five, four, the cock in his mouth is nudging the back of his tongue and he can't speak or breathe and it's too deep even to gag, so he just writhes, three, two, one, they tell him he may come and he does, nearly shrieking, nearly dying, so desperate he's barely human as he shoves himself back and down and back and down, just wanting more, harder, because in his fantasy he's the best boy and he can take all the cock anyone could want to give him, and please his Sir three times over, and the feeling is so indescribably good, and he's just coming and coming and he wonders distractedly

and uncaringly if he'll ever, ever stop.

And then in his fantasy, they let him lay there with them, and they stroke the edge of his ear with cool fingertips and tell him that they'll keep him bound and gagged in this closet as their fucktoy forever, and that he'd better get used to being a glory hole slut because he's not good for anything else, but he's so, so, so good for them.

And then, outside of his fantasy, he pulls the sheet over himself in his empty apartment and lets his heartbeat slow as he tries to sleep, tries not to wonder what became of the man in that bar.

**

He goes back the next night but he doesn't really know why. It's not like anything could change. It's not like he could become somehow less of all of the things that he is that mean he isn't ever going to get what he wants.

But he goes back anyway, and the bartender is on the wrong side of the bar, tapping his fingers on the rim of his glass, looking around to him over one black-jacketed shoulder at the sound of the door shutting.

Nobody else has looked up or noticed him; it's as if he doesn't exist to anybody else. His heartbeat thuds in his ears, sure the second anyone looks at him they'll be able to see right through him, wrong and out-of-place and broken and strange, and they'll throw him out. But he always feels like that, so he just puts his hands in his pockets as he approaches the bar.

When he reaches it, he finds he's next to the bartender, looking at the corded muscles of his forearms against the wood grain of the bar. Forearms ending in large hands, long fingers, each hand curled around a lowball glass. The man still doesn't look up, but he slides the full glass to him, the skidding across wood impossibly loud, before lifting the other to his mouth.

"Sit," says the bartender shortly, and he doesn't mean to obey but somehow he's just obeying, his backside hitting the stool almost before the word is clear of the bartender's mouth.

"I—I," he stammers, and then quails. He puts his hand around the cool glass and picks it up, his gaze fluttering from the amber liquid to the bartender's face. The scent of liquor wraps itself around the inside of his skull as the man finally turns his head to look at him, fixes him with those eyes that he'd woken panting from a dream about just that morning.

"You came back," the bartender says, and he smiles. "Would you like to tell me why you left?"

Last night, wrenching himself away throwing himself towards the door of the storeroom fumbling the knob with slick hands hearing words behind him but everything in his head screaming get out get out—fearing what will happen if his jeans are opened, if the ways his body is wrong and fraudulent and bad are laid bare—unable to bear the disgust pulling the tension back into a face that a heartbeat ago had been bright with hunger—half-running through the bar trying to look like he's not crying and his hair isn't messed up from being grabbed—alone in the street, cheeks drying in the cold air, skin feeling tight and brittle, a siren wailing a few streets away. Every step presses the seam of his jeans tighter against him and the faster he walks, the more he thinks he might not be able to stop himself from falling to his knees and shuddering through an orgasm right there on the sidewalk at three thirty in the morning or whatever it is.

He takes a sip of the liquor, feels it like burning fingers pressing his tongue down.

"I'm sorry," he says after a moment, rushed, his voice strained and high, and knows immediately that he's said the wrong thing by the way the bartender exhales through his nose. He wants to apologize again, but he presses his lips together instead.

"I didn't ask if you're sorry," he says, his voice low, not ungentle. "Do you need me to repeat the question?"

He shakes his head and takes another drink, too fast, coughs. *I'm sorry. I'm sorry. I tricked you. I'm sorry.*

"I got scared." He has to try twice to get the words out because his throat is clogged with anxiety, but he knows the bartender heard him because he gives a little satisfied sound before speaking again.

"Are you still scared?"

He nods.

"But you came back."

He nods again, watches the muscles of the bartender's throat move as he swallows.

"I'm glad you did."

That feels inside his ribcage the way the liquor felt on his tongue. He can almost let himself pretend that it's going to be okay, that he doesn't have to drop this bomb on what's happening here.

The bartender says, standing, "Would you like to come with me?"

The sudden shift in his energy makes the boy catch his breath.

You can still walk out of here, he reminds himself. You can get up and walk out the door and never come back into this bar and go back to

your apartment and jerk off and be safe.

But instead of doing that, he downs the rest of his drink without flinching, meets the bartender's eyes, and slides silently off the bar stool. The shot curls through his belly, burning out all the rottenness in him and replacing it with lava.

His steps aren't steady, but he's surrounded by warmth as he follows the bartender down the hall, the music fading. Instead of the storeroom, he's led up narrow cement stairs to the second level of the bar, closed for the night, dim, an unplayed rack expectant on the pool table. He feels a rush of lightheadedness in the sudden quiet.

He steadies himself on the wall and the lightheadedness spreads downward through his body, coiling in his gut and his crotch, as if arousal and nervousness and whiskey and fear are all the same sensation, just located in different parts of his body.

"This is better, isn't it?" The bartender gestures to the empty room. "A little privacy."

He wants to say exactly the right thing—wants desperately to be the person who would know the right thing to say—but everything running through his head sounds stupid and childish.

The bartender inclines his head at his silence. "Shy, boy?"

The word is an electric shock down the backs of his thighs.

"That's all right," says the bartender, "you can be shy. Can you say stop if you need to?"

He nods. He's sweaty, and everything feels staccato. He wants to kneel, but he doesn't know if that's right. Instead, he holds very, very still.

The bartender beckons to him with a tiny motion of two fingers, and he crosses the room without breathing. "I can see," he murmurs, once the boy has reached him, shifting from foot to foot, "that you want to be on your knees very badly. So I'll make a deal with you. You can get on the floor if you'll answer a question for me—with words—once you're there. What do you think?"

He nods, and then he says "Yes" so softly that it isn't more than a hiss.

"Yes?" prompts the bartender, and he scrambles, fumbles. "Um—sir? Yes, sir?"

The bartender smiles a little and gestures. "Go on, then."

He drops to his knees like the recoil of an elastic band, so fast his knees crack and ache on the floorboards, and it draws the seam of his jeans hard against him and brings to his attention that he's desperately wet.

"That's a good boy," he hears from above, and it's so good and such a time bomb that he has to close his eyes. There's a hand on his jaw, tipping his face up, the pad of a thumb against his lower lip. He breathes in, smells skin and alcohol and something sharp and salty. He swallows, opens his eyes, meets that dark implacable gaze. Waits.

"Question," says the bartender, and the boy's stomach turns over. This is probably the moment when it ends, when he gets thrown out or worse.

That thumb lingers on his lip and that whiskey voice says, "What's so frightening, then?"

He breathes out, then in, then holds it. He has to come clean. He has to. He runs through sentences in his mind and they all sound like nonsense.

"I thought—I thought if you touched me—I was afraid of what would happen if you touched me." And after a moment: "Sir."

"Mm. I'm touching you now."

"Yes, sir."

"Is anything bad happening?"

"Not. Not yet." He isn't going to cry—he's *not*.

The bartender doesn't answer; just quirks an eyebrow. He can't put it off any longer, and so he winces and says in a rush, "My body isn't like other boys' bodies."

When the bartender doesn't say anything, doesn't move, doesn't react so far as he can tell, he thinks maybe he didn't say it aloud at all. So he says, "I thought—I was scared that you would be angry if you found out."

It hurts; it's like holding a hot iron to keep this eye contact, and he finally breaks it, letting his eyes drop to the belt buckle directly ahead of them. The seconds stretch and there's still no response.

He thinks: *I should run.* But he doesn't. Instead, he looks up at the bartender's face and, quickly, back down.

The bartender puts his other hand on the other side of his face, cups him as if he's a palm full of water, trembling, nearly spilling over, and traces his fingertips down the sides of the boy's neck, down his tendons, to his shirt collar. He grips the shirt collar on both sides and gives the boy a little shake, making him meet his eyes, and as deliberately as if he's pulling the boy's guts out of his belly, he unbuttons the first button.

His hand flies to his throat reflexively, grabs the bartender's hands to still them, and the bartender leans back, letting go of him. He

feels suddenly ten degrees colder, his hands frozen on his own shirt collar, his own breath loud in his ears.

"I'm not going to hurt you," says the bartender softly. "Please, show me."

The boy's hands are still on his collar, trembling, and he presses his lips together, meets the bartender's eyes, and—*either I'm in this or I'm not*—unbuttons the next button, and the next one, revealing the fabric of his binder where a smooth, flat chest should be.

He wants to watch the bartender's eyes but can't bear to, can't bear to see them fill up with recognition and disgust. Exposed like this, his binder feels even more constricting than usual.

No blow comes, no punishment, and he risks a glance up. The bartender's lips are parted, elbows on the bar behind him, just looking at the boy kneeling in front of him with his shirt open and the brink of tears in his eyes.

"I'm not going to hurt you," he says again, his voice a little thicker with understanding.

"I'm sorry," he says. "I—" And then he stops when he sees one of those long fingers lift a fraction of an inch, those dark eyes narrow, calculating, evaluating.

"I don't want to hear another apology come out of that sweet mouth; you understand?"

He closes his mouth, frowns, eyes pleading, and the bartender continues: "You still want to be a good boy for me?"

Something like relief, fear, he barely knows, all the emotions he's been holding at bay, it all floods through him. "More than anything," he answers. "Sir." And a shiver drips down him at how easy the honorific is starting to feel in his mouth.

"Then you trust that if I didn't want to be here with you, with the boy that you are, I'd leave."

His eyes flick towards the stairs, back to the bartender's face, and he nods, tries with all his might to believe it.

One hand lifts, turns, beckons, and, grateful for instruction, he scoots gracelessly forward until his knees are inches from the toes of the bartender's boots.

"Such a sweet mouth," the bartender murmurs, almost to himself. Fingers back on his lips, warm. "You want to give it to me, don't you?"

God, he does. His breath escapes as a whimper, and then oh, the fingers are in his mouth, stroking his tongue with a gentleness that is barely contained force. He feels split open and splayed, like this

touch is spreading wide all the parts of him that are usually closed like a book and laying him bare, and he opens his mouth wider, hands gripping his own thighs.

The bartender's other hand snakes around the back of his head and grips his skull, the nape of his neck, holds his head motionless and obedient as he penetrates his mouth. "*Don't you,*" he says again, pressing his tongue down hard

"Yrnghngn," the boy says around those fingers, so overloaded it's like he's being held by the brainstem, like he couldn't keep him out even if he wanted to. He feels drool collecting behind his lower lip and sliding along the fingers ratcheting his mouth wide, doesn't resist, forces himself not to try to escape these unfamiliar sensations.

He's not a virgin, of course. But feeling desire—and feeling desired—like this, this is new, and he is a little afraid of how desperately he wants to dive headfirst into it, give everything up, belong entirely to this strange, frightening man and his strong fingers, belong to him in every conceivable way. He hasn't known how to *be* his whole life, but suddenly he's receiving instructions, and they're so simple, and it thrills him to obey.

And he's flying blind—he's been so certain for so long that he could never, ever belong like that, not if somebody knew the truth, that he has no idea what to do with not being walked out on.

He closes his mouth and sucks, hears small hungry sounds escaping his throat, hears the bartender's voice above him, "That's right, that's a good boy. Show me what that mouth can do," and he ducks forward until he feels his fingertips bump the back of his throat, sucks hard as he feels his body clench. As much as he's uncertain, as much as he's afraid, nothing is stronger—nothing he's ever experienced has ever been stronger—than the feeling of being called a good boy. He'll endure anything, drool until he's a desiccated husk, never speak again, even kneel here with his binder exposed, baring the places where his body is soft where it should be hard, his protections gone, until the bartender realizes his terrible mistake and leaves him, panting and smeared with his own drool, and goes off to put his cock in a real boy—for the chance of hearing that one more time.

The fingers still in his mouth, and he looks up. The bartender's thumb comes up under his chin, the pressure point making him blink and gasp a little.

"You like having your mouth used?"

He nods against the hands holding him by the skull, giving a

wordless little whine.

"You want more?"

He opens his mouth as wide as he can. *Please*, he thinks, *please, please*. Drool strings out, dripping to his chest.

"Go on, then. Get my cock out, if you're so greedy."

Hesitant, he raises his hands to the waistband of the bartender's pants, touches the button, twists to look up into his eyes, his mouth still wet and wide. When the bartender says nothing, just stares, he squares his shoulders and opens his pants.

The bartender's cock is there, it's *right there*, it's so close to his mouth, and there's drool running down his chin and his heart is going fast as his hands falter and fall down to his own thighs. "You want this?" he hears, and he gives a wet gurgling moan that couldn't be interpreted to mean anything other than *yes*.

"Stay. Don't close your mouth." The words are punctuated by a light slap, only hard enough to startle, and he obeys as the hands on his nape and jaw are withdrawn. He pulls in a long breath and looks up to see the bartender rolling a condom down the length of his cock. The realization of what that means—that the bartender was waiting for him at the bar with a condom in his pocket—makes his insides clutch, his breath stutter.

Another slap, on the other cheek, harder, making him start and choke, and he realizes he's been sitting and staring at the cock in front of his eyes for far too long, and he kneels up, palms against his thighs, and he closes his eyes and puts his mouth around the bartender's cock and the bartender makes a noise and it's so good. He thinks, what if I never left this room? What if I just stayed here with my mouth open for the rest of my life?

He pushes his head forward and feels it slide between his lips, over his tongue, and he can't believe he's spent his whole life doing things other than this with his mouth. He leans into it, greedy like he's never had a chance to be, and as he starts to gag, he digs his fingers into his jeans and doesn't jerk away. He can take this. He wants to be able to take this. He wants to prove that he deserves this. He tries to moan, but no sound escapes around the cock filling his airway, so he just breathes through his nose and flutters his tongue and glories in the way those warm hands are back on his jaw and the back of his neck, not forcing or guiding, just touching him as he sucks.

"Little cocksucker," murmurs the bartender, not unkindly, "That's right. Greedy faggot."

The words feel the same as the slap did: by all rights, it should hurt, but somehow it's smooth and bright and addictive. He responds by sucking harder, breathing in the smell of him, letting little whimpers escape as air slips past his soft palate. He could be any other boy, any anonymous faggot with spilled beer soaking into the knees of his jeans and latex hot and slick against the back of his tongue. The thought of making the bartender come in his mouth feels like flying.

It's nothing like his fantasy, but it's just like his fantasy. Those filthy words twining around his brain, the fingers like iron immobilizing his head so all he has to do is stretch his jaw wider and let his mouth be used, it's so unfamiliar how good it feels, how much he likes it, it's unreal. He wants to do so well for him, take it all, learn it all, be good for him.

He wants to put his hand in his pants, but he's frozen from doing anything he hasn't been told to do, anything other than whimper and yearn and let this man use the open wet hole of his mouth. He's been wanting, fantasizing about hearing words like this on nights when he can bring himself to touch himself, and now it's real. All of his muscles clench as his gag reflex protests, but he ignores it, ignores that the unconscious parts of his body don't understand what's happening and are deeply afraid.

Gentle pushes at the back of his head urge him to bob, go up on his toes and spread his knees wider, arch his whole back into the thrusts and hollow his cheeks to pull at the heat and rubber of it as it slides out, still whispering those gorgeous, filthy things: "Yeah, that's a good boy, suck it for me, I know this is what you've been wanting, yeah."

He pushes himself to take it deeper, so deep he wouldn't even have to swallow. He hasn't had any air in a while, but it doesn't matter, he doesn't need to breathe the way he needs to feel the bartender's hands around his skull, the thrusts suddenly become syncopated, the words blend together with startled groans, the hand in his hair becomes a fist as the bartender begins to come. Everything is rushing and floating and he could stay like this until he died, he doesn't care. He's not forcing his head, doesn't need to, knows he'll do it himself because he's so hungry, because from the first second they saw each other the bartender could tell he was starving for this.

Beyond that, he's so turned on, like he doesn't know he's been before in his life. It feels like one touch from those uncompromising hands would send him over the edge. The seam of his jeans bumps against him as he moves, his spread knees pressing the fabric hard

against him. He doesn't want it to end, keeps pressing forward, keeps trying to fit every bit of the bartender's softening cock into his mouth even as his breath and hips slow.

When the bartender pulls out, finally, ties off the condom, he says, "Keep that mouth open for me, faggot, you think I'm done with you?" And he does, he's panting, trying to get his air back, putting his tongue out, grinning. His throat feels empty, wrecked, the scent and taste of sweat and cock dripping through all his senses.

After a moment, the bartender gets down on one knee, closing his pants with one hand and laying the other on the boy's chest, right over the center of his binder. He leans forward and kisses the boy's wide, wet mouth, messily sucks and bites his lower lip until he's whining.

"Listen," he says roughly, "I want you to come for me. I want to hear what your voice sounds like when you're so close you can feel it in your eyeballs. I want to see how your body moves. I want to smell it. Will you give that to me?"

The boy's gasping and arching against the pressure of the hand on his sternum and the pressure of what the bartender is saying: he wants him. Even now, he's not tossing him aside. "Yeah," he says, breathless, "yeah, sir, please."

Maybe twenty-four hours ago, these same fingers, this same touch on his thigh drove him out into a panic of denial. Now, he yearns toward it, nervous and uncertain but not afraid, not quite. He holds his breath as the bartender spins him around, presses the curve of his back into the bartender's chest, and his hand drops to his waist, opens the button of his jeans with a deft touch. His eyes search the boy's face for signs of distress as his fingers slide into his boxers.

When the bartender's fingers touch his cunt for the first time, he whines and bites his lip and grinds down, and it's slick and hot and unfamiliar to both of them, and they're both frowning in concentration. The muscles in his thighs are shuddering as he moves, his hands braced against the floor, fuck, it's so good.

But the bartender's fingers are unpracticed, exploratory, and when one of them pushes inside him, it's too much, it's been too long, it hurts, and it reminds him all at once that the bartender just doesn't know what to do with a body like his, and without really thinking he yelps and tries to squirm away, escape the intrusion. The bartender responds by pulling his hand out of the boy's pants, laying it flat on his belly, gentling him.

"Not like that," the bartender says, not really a question, and the

boy gulps air, leans back against the hard plane of the bartender's chest, tells himself he's safe, and agrees. "Not like that."

"Show me," he says, laying the boy's hand over his own on his belly, and the boy obeys, guiding the bartender's hand back down, laying his small index and middle fingers over the bartender's larger fingers, pressing them gently into the heat of him in long, slow strokes.

"Like—ah. Like this," he pants, as the pressure starts to build again, sparking up and down his spine.

"Good," the bartender answers. "Good boy. Being so good for me. And you're—" He pauses, surprised, his fingers stilling. "You're ... hard? Your ... cock is hard?"

"Yeah," he confirms, "yeah, my cock is hard for you, sir, I'm so—I'm so—please—" He stops trying to form words and instead shows the bartender where to put his fingers, slides himself against them, lets his head fall back against his shoulder. The motion exposes his throat, which the bartender wraps his free hand lightly around, holding his windpipe tenderly.

The boy grunts as he feels his breath pass through that grip, held hard against the bartender's body by the throat and cunt, writhing mutedly, fire gathering in his limbs. He wants to come like this, his cunt and cock and throat under the bartender's unflinching hand. He could be any other faggot, but it's inescapable that he isn't, and he's still being held like this. The bartender's breath is hot against his ear, voice low and delighted as he snarls: "Come for me, boy."

At Sir's word, at Sir's command, he does. His breath stutters in the constriction of Sir's grip, and his body shakes, muscles standing out in his throat, electric, senses whited out with pleasure too enormous to be contained by the nerve endings in his body, as he bucks hard against their entwined fingers in his underwear—in his mind he's whispering *please, sir, please fuck me, please make me yours, please don't let me go*—he's pushing his throat into Sir's palm, the motion begging for *more*, for *tighter*, and Sir gives it to him, holds him tighter against his body as his hips jerk—jerk—roll, slow into a fluid writhe punctuated by shuddering spasms and his head lolls.

He feels little and hot in the bartender's arms, shirt hanging open, face smeared with drool. The hand on his throat relaxes, and he takes a full, unhurried breath for the first time since his hand touched the door of the bar. The waves of disbelief that he's okay, that no punishment's coming, waves that have been rolling through him since his knees first hit the floor are now crashing as breakers on

the shore. How is this possible? He twists to look at the bartender and sees dark eyes fixed on him.

"Filthy," purrs the bartender. "Nasty cocksucking slut, making a mess of yourself like this on the floor."

The boy licks his lips, lets out a shaky sigh.

"Thank you, sir," he says, and ugh, his voice is trembling and high and weak, and he turns his face away.

The bartender gives a little laugh and casually winds his hand into the boy's hair as he stands, hauls him effortlessly to his feet. He spits in the boy's face and watches it run unhindered down his cheek as he sways, dazed and panting, against the bar.

"I think you'd better get your faggot ass out of here." He spits again and uses his hand to rub his saliva into the boy's skin, his hair, and the boy raises his hand to the wetness.

Stunned, wobbling, he starts to make his way towards the stairs. Every step makes his knees almost buckle as his soaking cunt continues to clench, ears ringing, everything quiet like the first snowballs that start to tumble down a mountain before an avalanche.

"Boy."

He's reaching towards the doorframe to steady himself, and he pauses to look back; can't help himself.

"You'll come back tomorrow, won't you?"

He opens his mouth. Closes it again. Sniffs back the threatening tears and stares through bright eyes at the bartender, who's shrugging his jacket on and wiping his hands on his pants in a show of nonchalance that the boy doesn't quite believe.

"Yes sir," he says. "Of course I will, sir."

WE ANTICIPATE A SMOOTH FLIGHT

RACHEL KING

THE AIRPORT WAS, AS always, crowded. Susan and I were waiting to board a plane at Chicago's O'Hare Airport, watching first class passengers slowly file down the jetway. I glanced down at my boarding pass to make sure we were at the right gate. Even five years after legally changing my name to Carrie, I still got a kick out of seeing it on official documents. I wondered if there would always be a lingering echo of my pre-transition life, and whether or not it mattered. Before I could get too lost in thought, a perky young woman in a crisp blue uniform spoke over the PA. "We'll now continue boarding with our Gold, Polished Gold, Ultra Gold, Select Club Gold Extreme, and Ultra Select Club Gold Extreme Members, as well as anyone with a boarding pass printed on a rare earth metal."

I nudged Susan, sighing "I swear, that list gets longer and more ridiculous every time I fly." She nodded in agreement and rolled her eyes before returning to her e-reader. She was always reading something: for this trip she'd loaded the latest Julia Serano trans feminist analysis, a memoir about biking through Europe, and an alternate history sci-fi novel exploring the pressing question: What if the Titanic had shipwrecked on an island containing a surviving herd of dinosaurs? I always gave her a hard time about her eclectic reading habits, but it was one of the things that first attracted me to her. That, and her inescapably sexy soft-butch style. At 5'2", I had a good seven or eight inches on Susan, but she always made me feel small in the best way possible. Her piercing green eyes, short-cropped hair (dyed, this week, a dark red), tight tops, and loose

cargo pants alternately showcasing and concealing her lithe, fit body.

Susan and I had met at the indie feminist bookstore on the north side of Chicago, a queer cliche we liked to joke about. I'd been looking at graphic novels, and she'd been flipping through new arrivals in nonfiction. She struck up a conversation about the trans memoir comic I'd been holding and, well, the rest was history. I sometimes wondered what made her approach me. When I'm in a particularly foul mood, I doubt my desirability as a woman, as a trans woman, next to Susan's cisness. But when she catches me moping, she pulls me in for a kiss and insists that I'm beautiful. If that doesn't work, she offers to tie me up and beat the doubt out of me. Sometimes I even take her up on the offer.

That day, we were at O'Hare to catch a flight to Phoenix and go to the wedding of one of my high school friends. We'd been dating for over a year, but this would be the first wedding we were attending together.

"Susan." I poked her side. "They're finally boarding Zone Seven." We gathered our stuff and made the way down to the plane. We were in seats 44D and 44E, way in the back, but the flight seemed relatively empty. No one else sat in our row, and the row in front of us was empty too. "I guess no one else wants to go to Phoenix in August," I said.

"You mean no one else is dumb enough to go to Phoenix in August," Susan shot back.

"Whatever." I stuck my tongue out at her. "I'm going to have fun at this wedding, even if you're just going to be a cranky spoilsport. There's a pool at the hotel, and I'm going to get you in the water whether you like it or not." I nodded my head with certainty, but Susan looked skeptical. "If you're nice to me," I slyly continued, "I'll even wear that new bikini you like so much." I wasn't usually comfortable wearing bathing suits in public, but Susan had a tendency to make it worth my while. She seemed to consider my offer as we moved to the back of the plane.

We settled into our back row seats, Susan looked down at her e-reader as I moved over to the empty window seat. I peered out the window as we taxied and then lurched our way into the air. Susan made fun of me for my rapt gaze out the window, but I didn't care. Flying was fun, and even her dour attitude couldn't ruin it for me.

Soon enough, the pilot came on and told us we'd reached our cruising altitude. The seat belt signs dinged off, and Susan put away her e-reader. She turned to me with a smirk, asking, "Wanna

play a game?"

I turned my attention from the window. "Did you bring something? I think I have Settlers of Catan on my tablet, but I have trouble staying focused when you have to pass the whole game back and forth."

"I was thinking of something a little different." Glancing around to make sure no one could see her, she pulled a small black box, flatter and taller than a deck of cards, from her backpack and placed it on my tray table. The brand, Arenos, was written on the black surface in embossed white letters. My eyes went wide as I realized what it contained: the polished metal butt plug we'd won in a raffle at a fundraiser for a Chicago sex worker's advocacy organization. I knew the box itself was utterly unassuming, but I still scanned the aisle nervously, sure someone would know what she was suggesting. At the same time, whether or not I wanted to admit it, I felt a jolt of excitement go through me, a flash of electricity across my nipples and a tightening in my crotch. I crossed my legs, squeezed my thighs together, and let out a sharp breath.

I stared at the box in front of me. Susan and I had talked about public play in the past, but our discussions had never left the realm of fantasy. I glanced nervously at her. She, sensing my uncertainty, started to reach out for the box, saying, "I'm sorry, I shouldn't have—"

I cut her off, taking the box off my tray table and saying, "Nothing to be sorry about." I looked her in the eyes. "Really. I think this sounds like an amazingly fun—" I paused, always a sucker for dramatic effect. "Game."

I saw Susan relax, and I hoped I sounded less nervous than I felt.

With another glance toward the front of the plane, I reassured myself that no one cared or suspected what we were up to. I put the box in my purse, stood up, and went to the nearby lavatory. Once there, I put the box on the counter and took a moment to catch my breath. I opened the lid and took out the cold metal plug. I was always surprised at how heavy it felt, given its relatively small appearance, but the weight was a delightful reminder of its presence once it was in place. Susan had helpfully placed a single travel packet of Sliquid lube in the box (our favorite brand), giving me everything I needed. I wondered how she got the plug through security, but realized I didn't care all that much.

I hiked up my dress, a serendipitously convenient outfit choice, and pulled down my underwear. My cock sprang free, quickly rising with thoughts of what Susan might have in store for me. In spite of

having been on hormones for years, my penis still functioned as a visible barometer for how horny I was. When we first started dating, I worried whether Susan would be okay with my body, but she quickly made it clear that she loved every inch of me and my body.

With my dress tucked up under my chin and my underwear pulled down to my knees, I ripped open the packet of lube and coated the cool metal with the slippery gel. I caught sight of myself in the mirror and grinned. I rarely wear bras while traveling, as they inevitably become uncomfortable on long flights, so I was a sight to see: long hair down over my breasts, nipples hard, cock free, my whole body shivering in eager anticipation. I put one hand on the counter and leaned forward, while the other put the tip of the plug to my body. I jerked, involuntarily, as the cold metal reached my warm flesh, and began to push. Susan had been training me with progressively larger plugs, so this toy—perhaps a half inch at its widest—didn't present much of a challenge. But we'd experimented with its length and tapering, and it stayed firmly in place once inserted.

Try as I might, I couldn't help but let out a small groan of pleasure as the plug slipped partway inside me. I paused at the first flaring, then took a breath and pushed the plug in the rest of the way. My cock was rigid, jumping up and down with every breath, and I pointed it upward as I pulled my underwear back up to hold the plug exactly where it was. I closed my eyes as I let my dress settle back down around my body, slowly running my hands up over my hard cock, and then lingering up across my stomach to pause, groping my breasts. I marveled at their round firmness, smiling at the wonder of having a body that felt right, that felt like mine. I began to massage my breasts slowly, stifling a moan, and I gave my nipples a hard pinch. When I opened my eyes and put my hands at my side, I could see my nipples happily poking through the fabric of the dress. But the dress flared out far enough that the throbbing I felt between my legs remained invisible.

I washed my hands and returned to my seat, gingerly sitting down and letting out a gasp as I felt the plug settle deeper inside me. Susan's eyes were sparkling and she had a wide grin as she gave me a once over. "Well," she asked, "how ya doin'?"

My body was alive with sensation, so it took me a minute to answer. "Good." I smiled sloppily.

She glanced pointedly at my breasts, saying, "You look cold." We both laughed, and she lifted the armrest. "Come cuddle, and I'll keep you warm." She suavely put her left arm around me while she

pulled out a travel blanket with her right.

"Nice move," I observed. "You do this with all the ladies?"

"No, just the ones I like."

I leaned into her as she arranged the blanket over our laps. I could feel the warmth of my body all along my side, and my cock twitched in time with my pulse. I glanced down at my breasts, nipples still firmly on display, and idly wished I could give them the attention they deserved. But my eyes drifted shut and my mind drifted elsewhere as Susan snuck her hand under the blanket and on my thigh. She slowly, ever so slowly, began to drag her hand—and thus my dress—up toward my crotch.

Without thinking, I subtly shifted my legs open, granting her easier access. She turned her head slightly, whispering "Good girl" into my ear. I could hear the smile on her face, even if I couldn't see it. Her hand continued its journey upward until I felt her thumb come to rest on the outside of my underwear and begin to gently stroke my cock, the rest of her fingers pulling my legs even further apart.

"Mhn," I whimpered, trying desperately to stay silent and keep my face neutral. Susan whispered back, a calming *Shhh*. She seemed satisfied with how far apart my legs rested, and she took her hand away from my crotch and thigh and carefully moved it down to where the flared base of the butt plug rested beneath my underwear. She easily found the metal hiding behind the fabric and pushed upward, causing tiny gyrations in my hips and an urgency from my cock.

"Nice fit," Susan intoned in my ear.

I didn't have the presence of mind to respond.

Confident that the plug wasn't going anywhere, Susan's hand traced its way back up toward my crotch. Not every trans woman enjoys having their penis played with, but mine has always been a source of pleasure for me. And while hormones hadn't killed my erections, they had caused my sensitivity to spike through the roof. Susan and I had been together long enough that she knew the kind of gentle touch I craved.

Lazily, as if she had all the time in the world, Susan pulled at the elastic of my underwear and placed her fingers loosely around my cock. The feel of flesh on flesh was intoxicating, and my whole body jerked in response, my hips twitching upward in need. *Shh*, Susan whispered again, calming me. "You don't need to move a muscle."

I thought her suggestion to not move would be easier said than done. My erotic nerve endings have always had a mainline to my

spinal column, so not moving a muscle was usually a challenge for me. Something I'm sure Susan knew.

Susan must have had another packet of lube and opened it while I wasn't paying attention, because her hand was delightfully slick. She began to stroke my cock slowly and steadily, moving from the base and carefully swirling her fingers around the head, only to return back down and up over and over. With each stroke my hips twitched minutely, in spite of my attempts to keep perfectly still, causing the plug to move inside me and increase my pleasure. I was pretty sure the twitching wouldn't be visible to anyone whose hand wasn't between my legs. At least I hoped it wouldn't be visible.

Making a circle with her forefinger and thumb, Susan began to stroke my cock with more urgency. I was doing my best to stay silent and still, but I know a few stifled sighs escaped. Had my attention not been focused elsewhere, I might have been concerned about whether anyone could see us. As Susan increased the pace, my body began to jerk in time to her rhythm. I started to roll my shoulders, causing the fabric of the dress to pull across my breasts, alternating between loose and taut, making my nipples ache with need. Somehow, Susan brought up the blanket with her other hand so that our entire bodies were covered from the neck down, and she strongly groped my left breast. I barely stifled the moan that wanted to escape as Susan continued to use one hand to stroke my cock and the other to pull and twist my nipple.

As Susan brought her finger and thumb up and down my cock once again, the sensation overwhelmed me, and I fell into a rolling silent orgasm—or at least mostly silent. Susan could feel my cock twitch and spun her fingers around the tip. Fortunately, hormones meant there was no ejaculate to clean up. I pressed back into the chair and felt my body clench around the plug, filling me perfectly. As I started to come down from my ecstasy, Susan removed her hand from my breast and pulled my head onto her shoulder. She placed her other hand on my still-throbbing cock with a sense of casual ownership and held me as my body writhed in aftershocks.

Slowly, as if waking from a sleep, I licked my lips and allowed my eyes to flicker open. I turned to meet Susan's merry gaze, and I couldn't help a grin from spreading across my face. As my senses returned to me, I glanced around the airplane. So far as I could tell, no one had noticed our fun. Susan reached around my shoulder to gently grab my breast while applying light pressure to my crotch. My body couldn't help but respond, and I at last pulled her hands

away and grasped them in my own. I snuggled up against her under the blanket just as the pilot came on over the PA.

"We're about thirty-five minutes out from Phoenix and have begun our final descent. Please return your seats and tray tables to an upright position as we come into Phoenix Skyharbor Airport, and we hope you've had a pleasant flight."

Pleasant didn't even begin to describe it.



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ABOUT THE AUTHORS

I (ADONIS ALVAREZ, Hot Story for a Cool Day) first realized I was Transgender when I watched Tarzan for the first time, at seven years old, and deduced I was a lot more like him than Jane. I was raised by my grandparents who despite not having any experience with gender nonconformity—Communist Cuba isn't exactly a breeding ground for that sort of thing—treated me exceptionally well. Love goes a long way like that. I took a course called Native American Religion my third year of college, where I learned about myself through a different cultural lens. To this day, I still identify more with the term two-spirited than transgender. My grandpa's a Freemason, so I guess he's who I inherited my love for the occult from. Either way, I didn't come out as Transman until I was 21. That's around the same time I started getting serious with the person who inspired this story. She taught me how to stand up for myself and had a more active role in shaping my behavior as a man than my own mother. I took her for granted, though, and now she's dating someone else. But she's still with me in the food I make, in the air I breathe, and in the words I type. Sometimes I wonder if I write just so I can be with her again. My second greatest love is my home planet. I'm currently reading a book titled the *Synthesis of Yoga*; it's about reestablishing our connection with the Divine so that we can create heaven here on Earth. My goal is to transcend (no pun intended) my physical, spiritual, and mental limitations so that I may perfectly serve the Master of Light and reclaim this world from the forces of Darkness, one step at a time. Thank you for this opportunity.

AHI WI-HONGI (Your Average Tuesday) is a takataapui transmasc person from Aotearoa, New Zealand. They do some activist stuff, which you can look up if you're interested. They like swimming in rivers, sleeping in old sheds, and being a lower class bipolar hot mess. They aspire to be your problematic fave.

Spoken word performer turned fiction writer, student turned sex worker, TEDDY BROADBENT (Lace) grew up on a healthy appetite of New Zealand writers which brought about their love of the beautifully mundane. A childhood passion for stories blossomed into their emergence as a slam poet performing in the Auckland youth poetry scene. Using poetry to navigate their somewhat murky sexuality and gender, Teddy rediscovered their penchant for prose and dove headfirst into telling the tales of the LGBT community they knew; the camaraderie and divisions, the romance, heart break, and adventure set against the diverse backdrop of an urban hub.

PAIGE BRYONY (The Scholars and the Whores) worked for years as both professor and prostitute. She leaves it up to readers to decide which is the more honest job.

DREW CORDES (The Lonely Sissy) is a writer and activist from Albany, NY, now living in New Orleans. Coercively assigned “male” at birth, they have occupied many identities in the course of their life—gay man, crossdresser, trans woman, lesbian, butch, queer, trans man, sissy, trans femme, and more. They consider their current genderqueer identity a summation and embodiment of that entire history. Drew is drawn to work around transmisogyny, neurodiversity and disability justice, alternative healing, philosophy, intersectional anticapitalist politics, sexual liberation and kink, and sustaining queer/trans communities by resisting assimilation and respectability. More of their writings can be found at drewcordes.com.

KATHERINE CROSS (Singularity) is a scholar and transfeminist cultural critic who writes extensively about technology and how we socially engage with and through tech. Her work has been published in *Time*, *Bitch Magazine*, the *Guardian*, the *Establishment*, *Rewire*, and elsewhere. She writes a weekly column on videogaming for *Gamasutra* and is currently working on her PhD at the CUNY Graduate Center.

PRETTY EYES ELLIS (Hookup Culture) is a genderfluid two-spirit author and writer living in the Pacific Northwest. Besides being active in star’s community, star enjoys late-night cooking, sadomasochism, and B horror flicks. Star’s writing is an intimate blend of gritty nonfiction and whimsical fantasy, with a grim backbone, and a similar dynamic goes into star’s art, which is mixed

medium found object collage. Star is a coordinator and contributor for Lion's Main Art Collective.

ANDI GRACE (Ocean Calling Home) is a poet, author, community folk herbalist, reproductive justice rebel rouser, public witch, tarot card reader, community educator, gardener, tender-queer-femme, and goat wrangler. a sweet and fierce sag-demi-slut who adores trans cock. they carry ancestral ties to celtic and german mennonite ancestry. you can find their work at www.andigracewrites.com.

DAEMYN EDWARD HAMILTON (The Sorceror's Summons) first whispered his new-found discovery—that is, the need to be referred to with masculine pronouns—to his best friend on the bus ride of a school theater trip back in 2008. Ever since then, his life has been one naïve young person's dream meeting reality at a time. As a child who loved watching anime and was introduced to Dungeons and Dragons at a young age, he fell in love with the fantastical and adventurous, and he has made it a personal goal to create not only trans-inclusive, but trans-specific fantasy stories. His pet's name is Shadow, but it's not a hedgehog; she's a cat. You can find Daemyn @DaemynHamilton on Twitter.

TOBI HILL-MEYER (Brunch Service) was named #3 in Velvet Park Media's list of the 25 Most Significant Queer Women in 2010 and is one of the few people in the world who can claim being both an award winning porn creator and a children's book author. She is a multiracial trans woman with nearly two decades experience working with feminist and LGBTQ organizations. With her background in activism, she operates her own media production company, *Handbasket Productions*, creating stories and entertainment that reflect community needs and values, including her erotic documentary series *Doing it Online*. <http://patreon.com/DoingItOnline> <http://TobiHillMeyer.com>

ISZ JANEWAY (please don't leave), aka ThirtyHelens, is an ogress and gross smut writer, sad fiction magician and porno comics creator. She's the author and artist of the serialized story *Gay Losers* and the much less serious porn comic *My Pet Piper*. Her art currently focuses on reveling in the bodies of trans women and is almost never not about lesbians. Isz was born in the Northwest Territories, Canada and currently lives with her muscles in Ottawa.



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ALLISON KAPITEIN (A Clean Shirt) publishes serious stories by day and writes melancholy stories by night, but is overall pretty fun to be around, really, they promise. They like home grown veggies, science, and their giant feline overlords. They can't live without their bike, and their ego sadly depends on how well they can make a fire. They're a queer, switchy, poly kinkster with a gender yearning towards masculine with little regard for the body they happen to come in. Lives behind the dikes. Their erotica can also be found on *Literotica*.

RACHEL KING (We Anticipate a Smooth Flight) is a trans woman from the Midwest. She is currently hiding under your bed.

RYLEY KNOWLES (Death You Deserve) is agender, agnostic, a furry, a stoner, a Steven Universe fan, and a bad-brain haver. They are an anxiety-ridden mess. They have been a communist for five years and a member of the Harry Bridges chapter of the Communist Labor Party. They write zines about depression and poems about transmasculine Loki. They live in Tacoma. They have high ambitions and low-self esteem. If anyone wants to talk to them, all hate mail and confessions of undying love should be sent directly to pukingtoreador@gmail.com.

SHAWNA LOGUE (Accommodations) is a transgender woman who enjoys Dungeons and Dragons (especially 5th edition) and RPGs in general, Steven Universe, reading, talking to cats, video games, *Revolutionary Girl Utena*, being a good housewife for an amazing and supportive partner, comics, and subverting fantasy tropes. This is her first short story publication, though she has previously had poetry published in *George Street Carnival*. Shawna is a survivor of childhood and intimate partner abuse, and does as much advocacy as possible while working within the sometimes frustrating limits of her health. She especially enjoys fantasy and sci-fi stories that focus on "always evil" species, which often are created and sustained using racist and misogynistic tropes. Drow, orcs, duergar, gnolls, goblins, demons, and many more species are routinely given no more thought than as "things" or "others" to be destroyed. Shawna has always preferred those stories that instead choose to examine said species as people rather than as looming threats or crude caricatures.



RIAN J. LLOYD (Grease for a Phantom Noise) is a queer, agender, hippie-punk who uses fantasy to escape the way our world and culture hurts those with less power. Ey has been telling stories since ey learned to talk, and writing them down since ey learned to write. For Rian, reality is constructed by layers and layers of stories. In writing new stories, we can change the world.

VENYAMÍNA MACIVÈRRA (feelin myself, she/her) is a white anarcha-communist witch and a recent grad from Warren Wilson College in Asheville, North Carolina. She's passionate about DIT/DIY culture, harm reduction, herbalism, horizontal organizing, sexual freedom, and working toward socialist, moneyless futures. She also thinks it's really important we pay a lot of attention to race relations and history, on top of how capitalism, class, and the state function. Committed to a style of writing that's accessible to all, her stories, poems, and essays have appeared in *BU Voice*, *The Warren Wilson Peal*, and *Fifth Estate*.

LUNA MERBRUJA (Figuring it Out) is a Mexican-Athabaskan healer and artist. They are the author of *Trauma Queen* and *Heal Your Love*, with writings on race, gender, and healing published at *Everydayfeminism*, *Autostraddle*, *This Bridge Called Our Health*, and other publications. This city raised, small town loving writer is also a video gamer, aspiring therapist, and book editor at Biyuti Publishing.

CYD NOVA (How to Fuck) is a transsexual who grew up in New Mexico, became a hooker young and has been hustling ever since. He worked as part of the St James Infirmary for 8 years loving on the beautiful sex worker community of the Bay Area. He is a writer for the *Rumpus*, *Tits and Sass*, *QED*, and *Policy Mic*, and he has work published in *The Collection: The New Transgender Vanguard* and *Coming Out Like a Porn Star*. Currently he is living in rural Tennessee, writing a novel, and directing for Bonus Hole Boys, the world's first gay porn company featuring trans men.

MORGAN M. PAGE (Rental) is a writer and artist in Montreal. She was a 2014 Lambda Literary Fellow, and her work has appeared online and in print in *Plenitude Magazine*, *Tits and Sass*, *Montreal Review of Books*, and more. Her website is OdoFemi.com.



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ROCKET (A Boy in a Bar) is a gender-ambivalent, service-oriented transhumanist boi-thing, event planner, and consent activist who writes mostly poetry and prefers “it” pronouns. Nobody had already created the media that Rocket wanted to jerk off to, and so it became necessary to be the porn one wishes to see in the world. You can find Rocket on Tumblr at RockemSockemRocket, on Twitter at @eyeandy, on Fetlife at Yandy, and in meatspace in Brooklyn, throwing parties (www.MythPartyNYC.com), licking boots, and filing second-parent adoptions.

ARIA SA'ID (East Oakland Part II) is the writer of *Trans Sex in the City*, a concept blog of her essays and storytelling of the experiences of cosmopolitan TS girls who weren't invited to fish slumber parties. She resides in Oakland, and in her spare time she browses style blogs; enjoys people watching, habesha history, listening to D'Angelo and Aaliyah, run on sentences and intentionally bad punctuation, drinking americanos and chain smoking, memorizing James Baldwin and Picasso quotes on the steps in Union Square.

Born and bred in the Canadian not-so-wilds of Calgary, Alberta, ERIC EMILY SATCHWILL (Dinner Party) is a trans, non-binary writer with too much time on their hands. They have a tendency to get far too invested in their characters' love lives, both in their writing and their regular Dungeons and Dragons games. This would be a problem if their friends didn't have the same tendency. Their short story, “What Is It, Suzie?” has appeared in the *Felt Tips: Office Supply Erotica* anthology edited by Tiffany Reisz, and “A Poem for Emily with Response” has appeared in *Poems For The Queer Revolution* edited by Jude Orlando Enjolras. They can be found on Twitter as @Babseth.

D. SCARBOROUGH (Little) is a writer who mostly writes fanfiction these days but can be tempted to write original characters by a particularly beautiful anthology.

HAL SCHRIEVE (A Night in Early December) had a Virginia Woolf phase, then had a Tennessee Williams phase, and then majored in history at the University of Washington. Upon graduation he immediately fled the Pacific Northwest. He is now attempting to become a real person. He has had poetry and art in *Vetch* magazine. He is working on either finding an agent or self-publishing his first



novel, which is about a genderqueer zombie and a lesbian werewolf living in a police state in Oregon.

JOHN SQUIRE (*Nine Months in the Life*) is an author, attorney, advocate, and activist in New York with dreams of becoming a father and living on the *USS Enterprise*. John has been writing short stories since he was a boy, and he's thrilled to be able to share his writings with other people. Outside of advocacy, John dedicates himself to his passions of writing, baking, science fiction, and classic cinema, and considers himself a gentle and approachable, albeit introverted, nerd. He currently lives with his friend/roommate and their two cats. He dedicates this story to his father and best friend, who lives on in John's heart.

FRANCES STEWART (*How She Is After Work*) has told stories in one form or another for as long as she could speak, according to her parents. The advent of word processors has allowed her to write them down in a legible form. She writes SF, fantasy, and autobiography that reads like SF and fantasy. She loves her wife, and her friends, and would probably like you, too.

BOGI TAKÁCS (*To Rebalance the Body*) is a Hungarian Jewish agender trans person currently living in the US. E writes, edits and reviews short-form speculative fiction and poetry. Eir work has been published in venues like *Clarkesworld*, *Lightspeed*, *Apex*, and *Strange Horizons*. If you enjoyed this story, its sibling story is "The Need for Overwhelming Sensation" originally published in *Capricious* (ed. A. C. Buchanan) and reprinted in *Transcendent: The Year's Best Transgender Speculative Fiction*, 2015 (ed. K. M. Szpara). You can find Bogi at www.prezzey.net or on Twitter at @bogiperson. Also don't miss eir new webserial Iwunen Interstellar Investigations, at www.iwunen.net - featuring a cheerful nonbinary D/s couple solving magical crimes IN SPACE.

RAE WALKER (*The Cocksucker*) is a nonbinary trans lesbian in the UK. In her spare time she likes obsessing about gender, playing bass, and pretending to be a boy (old habits die hard). She plans to buy a strapon when she gets paid for this story.

RACHEL K. ZALL (*Welcome*) is a poet, performing artist, erotica author and hat enthusiast who has recently found a home in The



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Bronx. Her work includes stories in the Lambda Literary Award winning anthology *Take Me There: Trans & Genderqueer Erotica* and *Meanwhile, Elsewhere*, as well as *Exiles*, a comic book with art by Christianne Benedict. Many of the concepts and characters in this story were co-created with her beautiful and brilliant partner, Katherine Cross. Her website is <http://www.radiosilent.net>.

